ON TEST
COFFEE GRINDERS
107 CM TVS
HIGH CHAIRS
PARMESAN
CORDLESS PHONES
BABY FOOD

choice

JULY 2007
choice.com.au

Best-value shopping

Which supermarket costs less?

RIP-OFF BANK FEES

Australia's dental crisis

ANTI-AGING COSMETICS — DO THEY WORK?

Jane Mackenzie
Editor

Do you want the good news or the bad news?

Dental costs are too high for many people to afford. Banks are charging their customers penalty fees for overdrawn accounts and late credit card payments that appear to be far higher than the problem costs them. Nanotechnology is in our homes without most of us having heard of it, never mind knowing whether it's safe or not. Every long-haul flight you take wipes out any carbon emission savings you might have made in your home over the year. And still not all high chairs are safe.

There seems to be a lot of bad news in this issue of CHOICE, but there's some good news to keep us going too.

CHOICE's intrepid supermarket pricers have been out and about again — 36 of them in 23 cities around the country, pricing 33 products in 111 supermarkets. The result's pretty good for shoppers. Overall, the price of the CHOICE basket of groceries rose by 12% since our last survey in 2003, compared with a 16% rise in the the inflation rate for food in the same time period.

And if you live on the east coast the news is even better. If price really matters to you, you can save around 45% on staples and other basic food and groceries by shopping at Aldi. This supermarket chain, which now has over 140 stores in the ACT, NSW, Queensland and Victoria, buys all its products in bulk from manufacturers and packages them with its own brand names, which helps it keep its prices low.

More good news: you can now ignore whether the TV you buy has an LCD or plasma screen — our tests show you can get very good (and not so good) TVs in both technologies. You can get great-tasting coffee at home by buying a good grinder and grinding your beans fresh before use. And you can get fully featured, functional cordless phones for well under $100.

Let's just hope the good news keeps coming.

Coming soon ...

GPS for cars

Prices coming down.

Breadmakers

Make bread, rolls, pizza dough, focaccia, even jam ...

Premium beer

Expert tasters pick the best.

about choice

No advertising, no bias ... just reliable, expert advice.

CHOICE is a non-profit, non-party-political organisation, established in 1959 to provide consumers with information and advice on goods, services, health and personal finances, and to help maintain and enhance your quality of life. It's a Council member of Consumers International.

100% independent. We accept no advertisements, receive no government funding and don't take industry freebies. Our income is solely from the sale of CHOICE and our other publications and services. All the products we put through full testing are bought by us in the marketplace, except occasionally, to get the latest model, we may buy directly from a manufacturer where we can select a random sample. We never accept gifts for testing from manufacturers or retailers, though we sometimes borrow samples, especially of new products, for quick reviews. There are no hidden agendas and our recommendations are completely impartial — we simply road-test products and services so that consumers don't get ripped off.

Quality-rated lists products and services. Our ratings are based on quality without regard to price, and are derived from lab tests, expert judgments and reader surveys. If a product is high in quality and relatively low in price, we deem it a Best Buy. A rating applies only to the brand and model tested, not to other models sold under the same brand name, unless so noted.

Powerful and independent. We lobby and campaign on behalf of consumers to promote your rights, to influence government policy, and to ensure consumer issues have a high profile in the public arena.

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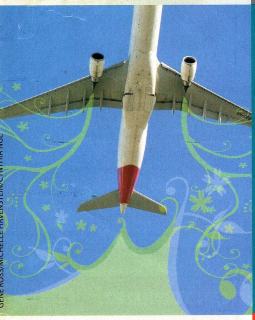
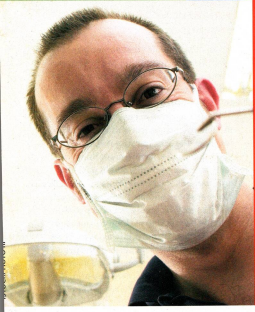
EMAIL us at
ausconsumer@choice.com.au

8 Best-value shopping



18 Carbon-neutral flights



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Due to rising costs, the price of a one-year CHOICE subscription will rise to $78/year ($19.50/qtr) in August 2007. For more, see May 2007, page 6.

Buying music online

GENE ROSSI/CYNTHIA NOE

THE TESTED SITES
- Apple iTunes Store
- Sanity Digital
- Soundbuzz Online Music Store
- Ninemsn Music
- Chaos Music
- BigPond Music
- JB Hi-Fi Music
- Harvey Norman Channel GO
- Sound Foundation

If you're new to buying music online you'll find it's mostly a fairly straightforward process, but there are technical restrictions and compatibility issues that limit where you can play the music. CHOICE *Computer* magazine tried nine different websites to see how easy they are to use.

- The technical restrictions are built into the file to limit the number of times the track can be copied, transferred or burnt onto a CD. This is called digital rights management (DRM). All the tested sites include information on DRM, although it's usually buried in the frequently asked questions (FAQs), Help or Information section.
- Music bought online is packaged as an audio file. The file format may restrict the media player software and portable media devices you can use to play the file. You can play AAC files on iPods and some SONY players, but not on most other portable media players. WMA files can be played on a range of portable players, but not on the iPod, which is the most popular music player on the market.

These compatibility issues make it difficult for you to mix and match music and music players, complicating the process of enjoying music bought online.

- The tested sites all sell tracks at similar prices. It's usually cheaper to buy an entire album than all the tracks individually. Album prices can vary from site to site, so shop around if you intend to buy an album.
- Not all online stores have the same collection of music. Most sites will have popular songs from the charts, but there's variation between individual sites.
- Music bought online should be good-quality and comparable to music CDs. We didn't have problems with the tracks we played, and the tracks we downloaded were all of CD quality.
- The tracks correctly identified the artist, album, style and so on, and the songs were all found to be the length stated on the download page.

The full report on the online music shadow shop is available in the July/Aug 2007 issue of CHOICE *Computer*. To subscribe, call 1800 069 552 toll-free or go to choice.com.au/magazines.

DO YOU WANT TO WORK FOR CHOICE?

CHOICE is looking for a casual verifier (quality control). You'll have a strong background in science or maths, excellent attention to detail and good communication skills. The work is as part of our verification team, on a casual basis, to assist in checking data, reports and articles for publication. Employment is on a project-by-project basis and may be intermittent. This job is located in our office in Marrickville, Sydney.

Skills and experience
- **You have strong numerical skills.**
- **A tertiary qualification in a science, technology or mathematics field and/or wide-ranging employment experience where similar skills have been developed.**
- **You demonstrate maturity, judgment and meticulous attention to detail, without being dogmatic.**
- **Have excellent communication and negotiation skills.**
- **Have an interest in consumer issues.**
- **Can be flexible about work hours and times, but be available at least three days per week when required.**

Salary Dependent on skills and experience, but around $26 per hour (plus 9% super).
Applications Please send applications in writing, including a résumé and addressing the above criteria, to: Manager, Quality Assurance & Control, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, or email them to verifier@choice.com.au. Closing date: 18 July 2007.

CAN YOU HELP?

WASTEFUL AND DECEPTIVE PACKAGING

It's an old complaint that sometimes when you buy something you get more packaging than product, and the current emphasis on reducing waste doesn't seem to have improved matters much.

We're interested in seeing packaging you think is among the worst offenders, either for sheer waste or because it also makes you think you're getting more than you really are. For example, a food pack that's only half full or a cosmetic product where a big, fancy box conceals a tiny bottle or tube.

If it's feasible, please mail the packaging (not the product) to us. If there's just too much of it, we'd appreciate a photo, or at least give us the exact name of the product so we can find it ourselves. Send your finds to Packaging, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204. Thanks for your help.

National Tree Day: dig it

In *An Inconvenient Truth* Al Gore lists "planting a tree" as one of the 10 most important things people can do to help stop global warming. It's been estimated that a single tree can absorb one tonne of carbon dioxide over its lifetime — not a bad result for a simple act.

So on 29 July Planet Ark invites everyone across Australia to grab their shovels and get planting during National Tree Day 2007. There's also a Tree Day for schools on July 27 so kids can get involved too.

Planet Ark says public understanding about the need to reduce our impact on the environment has never been higher, and that more people than ever are looking for ways to help — and National Tree Day provides a simple opportunity to take action. The simple act of planting a tree can help combat climate change, provide food and shelter for wildlife and help people connect positively with the natural world. (Tree planting has its limitations, though — see *Taking off*, page 18, for more.)

Last year over 300,000 volunteers planted 1.6 million native trees and shrubs at 3600 sites around the country. Thanks to people from all walks of life coming together to green up Australia, the total number of native trees and shrubs planted at National Tree Day sites since 1996 is over 10.5 million.

For more information phone the National Tree Day hotline on 1300 88 5000 or go to www.planetark.com/treeday.

National Tree Day® PLANET ARK

CORRECTIONS

ESPRESSO MACHINES

CHOICE, March 2007

The table on page 34 listed whether machines were semi-automatic or manual. They weren't listed correctly: the semi-automatic machines are:

- MAGIMIX L'Espresso Program Automatic 11233.
- DELONGHI Le Cube EN 185.M + Aerocinno.
- KENWOOD ES630.
- KRUPS XP 4050.
- BODUM 3020 Euro Granos.
- SOLIS Crema SL90.

EXPENSIVE VACUUM CLEANERS

CHOICE, June 2007

The table on page 52 showed the price of the DYSON DC08 Telescope Wrap as $799. The correct price is $699.

FLU SHOTS

CHOICE, April 2007

In this article we said, "A preservative known as Thimersol *[sic]*, which contains mercury and used to be included in influenza vaccines, has now been removed."

In fact some brands of flu vaccine contain trace levels of Thiomersal, as it's used in the manufacturing process (such as the brand FLURIX), while others have higher amounts, used as a preservative.

Many influenza vaccines available on the market in Australia don't contain any Thiomersal, so if you're allergic to it ask your GP to check the ingredients of the flu vaccine they plan to use first, to ensure it doesn't contain any.

WORLD CONSUMER SNAPSHOT

"IT'S ME!" NO, IT'S NOT

Our counterparts in Japan report a disturbing Japanese scam, where unscrupulous conmen take advantage of the gullibility of old, sometimes senile people, who see their relatives irregularly. It's the *Ore ore sagi* scam, where a fraudster phones an old person, pretending to be their grandson or other relative, and shouts "Ore, ore!" (it's me, it's me) into the phone, seemingly distressed. He might cry, shout and scream till the old person on the other end asks something like: "Is that you, Taro?" [the grandson]. The conman then assumes the grandson's identity for the rest of the call, explaining that he has an emergency and urgently needs some money, say for an expensive car repair, a medical expense from a car accident, an abortion, or a gambling debt. Japan is a cash society and debt holds great shame. The conman then begs the person to transfer a large amount of money into a specified bank account.

The fraud works like spam, with the fraudster making lots of calls in the hope of finding a few that fall for the trick. After a victim transfers the funds, he might call again and ask for more money. So keep an eye on older relatives, advises the magazine, keep in touch and warn them not to trust strange phone requests.

GOOD NEWS FOR CHOCOLATE LOVERS

German researchers have found that chocolate with a high cocoa content isn't just beneficial for heart health. *Test* magazine reports that an amino acid complex found in cocoa that's responsible for the taste of chocolate also has an anti-inflammatory effect, which helps prevent the formation of ulcers in the stomach.

In another study, researchers found that a certain cocoa flavonol (epicatechin) could be beneficial for the blood circulation and nutrient supply of the skin. So a cup of cocoa a day could be a simple recipe for beautiful skin.

And if you're worried about well-padded hips from all that chocolate, you'll be pleased to hear that a British study found hungry men prefer chubby wome *Test* reports. So keep him hungry, and blame it on evolution — apparently in meagre times (and ar chubby women offer better chances to bear an healthy offspring.

Could scan better

Next time you're out shopping, watch the scanner's screen carefully at the checkout, if you can, and check the docket to make sure you're charged the correct price. While electronic price scanners have certainly reduced waiting times at the checkout, unfortunately you can't always rely on them charging you the price that's listed on the shelf — judging by the 2007 national electronic scanning audit, the accuracy of computerised pricing systems leaves room for improvement.

The good news is that not all price scanning inaccuracies left shoppers out of pocket. In fact, the audit revealed more under- than overcharges in five of the eight states audited.

For the audit — the fourth in consecutive years, forming part of a national price scanning study — state and territory consumer affairs/fair trading officers spot-checked 159 stores, scanning more than 4000 items in service stations, pharmacies, hardware stores, discount and variety stores.

SA and Victoria recorded the best results overall, with 97% of items scanned correctly, followed by Queensland (95%), WA (92%), the ACT (89%), NSW (88%) Tasmania (84%) and the NT (81%).

The proportion of stores that recorded no inaccuracies at all ranged from just 10% in the ACT to 55% in Victoria (15% in Tasmania, 16% in the NT, 35% in NSW and WA, 40% in SA and 50% in Queensland).

Variety stores fared the worst nationwide, with 75% of stores audited having at least one price scanned incorrectly.

The highest overcharges in this audit occurred in a hardware shop in the ACT ($40) and a pharmacy in SA ($33).

Stores found to have scanning errors are generally asked to rectify them, and may be fined if there are still problems in follow-up inspections.

Supermarkets weren't a key focus in the 2007 audit, as most subscribe to the Australian Retailers Association's (ARA) *Code of practice for computerised checkout systems in supermarkets 2004*, which requires them to ensure price accuracy. Woolworths, Coles, Bi-Lo and Franklins have been signatories of the code for some time.

The code applies to all scanned goods priced below $50, except liquor and tobacco products and goods that have no barcode. It requires signatories to offer you a product free of charge if it's scanned with a higher price than its shelf price, and if you bought more than one of it, you get the remaining ones at the lower (shelf) price.

So if you have a pricing problem at the checkout, talk to the store (the manager, if necessary). Let ARA know of compliance problems with the code, and if you notice a store that has consistent errors, tell your office of consumer affairs/fair trading.

QUICK REVIEW

Dyson handheld vacuum cleaner

You've probably seen it advertised, but from its looks you'd think the DYSON Radix 6 DC16YT handheld vacuum cleaner would be more at home zapping aliens on a faraway planet than cleaning up the mess on your couch. So how does the most expensive handheld vac we've ever tested shape up on planet Earth?

We tested it on a variety of common household messes: spilled sugar, flour and cornflakes on a hard floor; potting mix and sand on carpet; and sand/gravel mix and pet hair in a car interior. We didn't test wet spills as the Radix 6 isn't intended for those.

We also checked how easy it is to empty the dustbin, clean around the edges of rooms, and fit the vac in and out of its wall bracket.

The Radix 6 was excellent at almost every task we threw at it. The only exception was cleaning up pet hair, and even then it was fairly effective, just rather slow. It's far better than any other handheld vac we've tested, and didn't lose suction power while cleaning even when it filled up. It's very easy to use and comes with a crevice tool, upholstery tool and dusting brush. On the downside there's no fall-out flap, which means you can't hold the cleaner with the nozzle pointing straight down — dirt falls out of the bin.

Overall, while we found the DYSON Radix 6 to be very effective, at $299 it's also very expensive. You might want to consider just how much use it would get in your home before you invest.

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

Choice food for kids is... CHOICE!

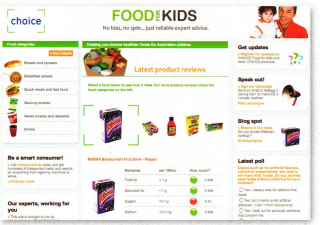
I wish to send you a note to say "absolute congratulations" on your new www.choicefoodforkids.com.au website. This is the most sensational site we've viewed — well done, not enough accolades can be given.

We found out about the site through the nightly media and I'm glad they covered it as otherwise we may not have come across it. We can't wait until our daughter comes home from a school camp she's on at the moment to let her peruse the site and gain some very valuable food information. We're sure this will allow her to contribute to helpful and inclusive decision-making when we shop next.

All we can say from the Mason family is well done, CHOICE — keep up the good work that you do.

The Mason family, SA

To visit the website go to www.choicefoodforkids.com.au.



Stories in the media

My magazine arrived in the post yesterday, but I already heard, early last week, about one article in the magazine, via the radio.

If we subscribers are the main source of funds CHOICE relies on (as per the article on page 2 of the March 2007 issue), why do we get the news secondhand? Also, I thought it was the policy of CHOICE not to release information to outside companies. I have often heard CHOICE stories, over the years, on the radio, as well as on what the commercial TV stations like to call current affairs programs.

Now this is off my chest, so to speak, please keep up the good work.

John, Qld

We changed the way we work with the media in September 2006. Before that we had a media embargo in place until the second Tuesday of every month. This meant subscribers received their issue in the mail before the stories were discussed in the media. Unfortunately we found more and more that the media were breaking our embargo and running our findings as their own before then, or inaccurately representing the article because we hadn't yet commented on it.

Because of this we decided to change our embargo, and send out our media releases at the end of each month, at the same time as magazines start to be mailed out to subscribers.

We'd stress that the media only provide superficial coverage of CHOICE investigations. Only a full reading of the article can give you the full story, with all the nuances. Media coverage can't be relied upon for an accurate or comprehensive representation.

CHOICE is a non-profit organisation that takes no government funding and carries no advertising. Media exposure is a major way we can publicise our work and get new subscribers. Without new subscribers the organisation couldn't continue its valuable research on consumers' behalf.

THUMBS UP!

- Mike from Melbourne offers his thumbs-up to HILLS INDUSTRIES. When his two-year old Baileys extendable ladder broke, he contacted the company, which sent out a representative to inspect the ladder. Even though it was out of warranty, HILLS concluded that misuse hadn't caused it to break, and delivered him a replacement ladder free of charge.
- Chris from Salisbury, SA, gives her thumbs-up to ONEIDA AUSTRALIA. Soon after purchasing an ONEIDA cutlery set she noticed that two of the knives had slightly curved blades. She emailed the company, asking where she could buy replacements, and received an email the next morning saying it would post replacements to her — which arrived within two days.

A big kid

Just a comment about the breakfast cereals issue: I have a child at home who eats the stuff — except he's 53. Tony Abbott is right — the habits we adopt in childhood do stay with us! I have succeeded in weaning my 53-year-old husband off Frosties, but am facing an uphill battle to get him off Rice Bubbles. He's convinced that anything that is 'healthy' will taste terrible. Remember: adults eat these 'children's' products too — and the products are equally bad for them!

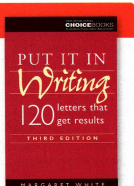
Margo, via email

LETTER OF THE MONTH

We want to hear from you — your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. Positive outcomes you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or tradesperson interest us too. Address these letters to Thumbs up at the address on page 2.

To thank you for writing to us, *Your Letters* awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner, John from Queensland, receives *Put It In Writing*, or any other book of his choice from the list on choice.com.au/books.

We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract. See page 2 for how to reach us.



Average
Price inc. specials $103.73
Regular price $108.36
The average of the Coles, Woolworths and IGA basket prices in all cities where IGA was surveyed.
The average prices for Coles, Woolworths/Safeway and IGA across all the cities where IGA was surveyed. The percentages shown are the amount by which each shops' baskets were higher or lower than the overall average. Aldi is included for interest, although it's not directly comparable because it sells only its own brands, not those we priced in other supermarkets.
IGA (14 stores in survey)
Price inc. specials $108.30 / +4.4%
Regular price $112.72 / +4.0%
Coles (30 comparable stores in survey)
Price inc. specials $97.47 / –6%
Regular price $104.87 / –3.2%
Woolworths/Safeway
(28 comparable stores in survey)
Price inc. specials $105.43 / +1.6%
Regular price $107.49 / –0.8%
Aldi
Regular price $55.70

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Shopping at ALDI can almost halve your grocery bill.**
- **There's not much difference in prices between Coles and Woolworths/Safeway, apart from specials.**
- **Stand aside, Newcastle — we discovered a new 'cheapest city'.**

Best-value shopping

For a cheaper weekly shop you can't beat Aldi.

If you shop at the same supermarket all the time you might not have noticed the big changes going on in the overall supermarket landscape. The big names, COLES and WOOLWORTHS, have rolled out their 'private label' products (WOOLWORTHS Select, COLES You'll Love Coles, etc) that seem to be knocking smaller brands off the shelves. Independents IGA and FOODWORKS have taken over a lot of stores, German discount chain ALDI has continued to grow on the east coast, and now COLES, one of the supermarket heavyweights, is up for sale.

So have these major changes impacted on your weekly grocery bill? Is there any difference in price between the two major players, and just where do you go for the lowest price? These are some of the questions we know you're asking — so we sent our diligent 'shadow shoppers' to supermarkets around the country to find out.

Aldi's the cheapest

Your first visit to an ALDI supermarket may be a surprise — brands you've never heard of, no-one to pack your bags for you and an underwhelming range of stock. But if it's value for money you're looking for, you can't look past it. ALDI has the unique strategy of buying all its products in bulk from manufacturers and then packaging them with its own brand names, which helps the chain keep its prices low.

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

Consistent with our previous survey, ALDI remained the most cost-effective option in supermarket land, with its own-brand basket costing almost half the price of the baskets of directly comparable items from the major supermarkets. The ALDI basket cost our shadow shopper just $55.70, compared to the average of the WOOLWORTHS/SAFEWAY, COLES and IGA baskets, which was $103.73. One of the items, anti-perspirant deodorant, cost $5.63 on average at the major supermarkets but only $1.69 at ALDI — less than a third of the price.

Surprisingly, despite the 16.1% inflation rate for food since our 2003 price survey, the price of ALDI products has actually decreased by 0.7%. ALDI Managing Director Buying, John Joyce, told CHOICE, "As the business has grown in Australia, ongoing efficiency gains have helped us keep our costs low, and we have provided genuine competition in grocery retailing by passing these savings onto customers …"

While we recommend ALDI on a price basis, at this point we've compared the quality of very few ALDI products against other brands. According to John Joyce, "ALDI is committed to providing our customers with top-quality products at incredibly low prices." A quality comparison will be coming in CHOICE later this year, but we'd recommend you try ALDI out for yourself and see if you like the quality — you'll certainly notice the savings in your pocket.

Unfortunately for savings-hungry shoppers who don't live on the east coast, ALDI isn't Australia-wide. It's expanded since our last survey in 2003, growing from 39 stores back then to over 140 stores in NSW, the ACT, Victoria and now Queensland. It plans to have 200 stores open on the east coast by the end of 2008.

Prices in other supermarket chains

Since the 2003 survey, there's been a 12% average increase in the cost of the CHOICE shopping basket from major supermarkets. See *A few price hikes*, right, for the contents of the CHOICE basket and how much each item has increased (or occasionally decreased) in cost since 2003.

There was no runaway winner in terms of the cheapest major supermarket. Although COLES had more specials at the time of our survey (with around 10 items in the basket on special, compared to around two or three items at WOOLWORTHS/SAFEWAY), its prices were only 2.6% cheaper than the WOOLWORTHS/SAFEWAY basket when the specials were disregarded. With specials, though, the difference was much larger, at 7.7%. Specials can clearly make a substantial difference to your weekly shop, so it's a good idea to keep your eyes peeled for them when wandering the aisles.

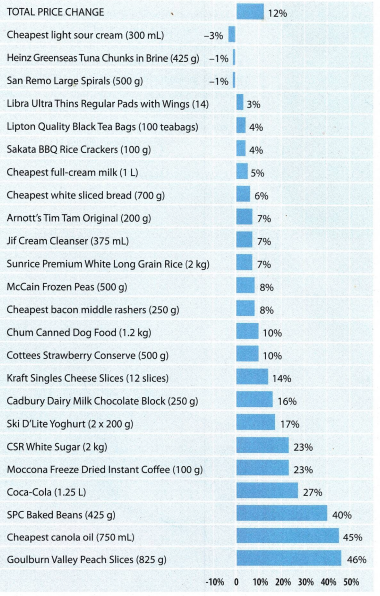
More specials also probably contribute to a difference in how much the two major supermarkets have gone up in price since 2003. It's clear even from >

A few price hikes

Although the overall price increase of the shopping basket was 12% since our last survey in 2003, some single items increased considerably more in price. GOULBURN VALLEY Peach Slices, for instance, rose from $2.53 to $3.70 in the past four years — a 46% increase. And the cheapest available canola oil and SPC Baked Beans saw increases of 45% and 40% respectively.

At the other end of the scale, some food items decreased in price by a small percentage. The cheapest brand of light sour cream dropped by 3%, while HEINZ Greenseas Tuna Chunks in Brine and SAN REMO Large Spiral Pasta both dropped by 1%.

Changes in the average price of basket items (not on special) from 2003–2007*


TOTAL PRICE CHANGE 12%
Cheapest light sour cream (300 mL) –3%
Heinz Greenseas Tuna Chunks in Brine (425 g) –1%
San Remo Large Spirals (500 g) –1%
Libra Ultra Thins Regular Pads with Wings (14) 3%
Lipton Quality Black Tea Bags (100 teabags) 4%
Sakata BBQ Rice Crackers (100 g) 4%
Cheapest full-cream milk (1 L) 5%
Cheapest white sliced bread (700 g) 6%
Arnott's Tim Tam Original (200 g) 7%
Jif Cream Cleanser (375 mL) 7%
Sunrice Premium White Long Grain Rice (2 kg) 7%
McCain Frozen Peas (500 g) 8%
Cheapest bacon middle rashers (250 g) 8%
Chum Canned Dog Food (1.2 kg) 10%
Cottees Strawberry Conserve (500 g) 10%
Kraft Singles Cheese Slices (12 slices) 14%
Cadbury Dairy Milk Chocolate Block (250 g) 16%
Ski D'Lite Yoghurt (2 x 200 g) 17%
CSR White Sugar (2 kg) 23%
Moccona Freeze Dried Instant Coffee (100 g) 23%
Coca-Cola (1.25 L) 27%
SPC Baked Beans (425 g) 40%
Cheapest canola oil (750 mL) 45%
Goulburn Valley Peach Slices (825 g) 46%
-10% 0 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%

* *These changes don't include Aldi, because its own-brand products can't be directly compared with the brands we priced in other supermarkets. We priced some new items this year too, which aren't shown because there's no comparison for them with 2003 prices.*

< a glance at the store-by-store % increases from 2003 in the stores surveyed in both years (Table 1, far right) that WOOLWORTHS/SAFEWAY has gone up considerably more than COLES: on average 14% vs 5%, including specials. Some WOOLWORTHS/SAFEWAY stores rose in price by as much as 17% or 18% for the items in the CHOICE basket, while one COLES store's prices even fell by 1%. The difference in price rise when you exclude specials is much smaller: on average 11% higher for COLES vs 13% for WOOLWORTHS/SAFEWAY.

Although IGA is one of the largest groups of independent supermarkets and continues to grow in size, it still doesn't offer tough competition for the two major supermarkets. When we compared COLES, IGA and WOOLWORTHS/SAFEWAY baskets for price, the IGA basket was found to be the priciest at $108.30, including specials — 4.4% more expensive than average (see the photo, page 8, for full results). >

HOW WE TESTED

- 36 shadow shoppers priced items from CHOICE's shopping list in several supermarkets each.
- 33 products, including 28 brand-name items and five non-branded staples, were priced. 24 of the items in the basket were kept the same as in the 2003 basket so a comparison could be made; the others were changed to reflect shopping trends. The cheapest available staples were chosen. No fresh vegetables, fruit or meat products were surveyed due to variations in availability and comparability of produce.
- In total, our shadow shoppers visited 111 supermarkets in 23 cities. These included COLES, WOOLWORTHS/SAFEWAY, IGA and one ALDI store (as ALDI maintains a single-price policy across its stores). We gave supermarkets no warning of the survey, so they wouldn't have time to change their prices.
- Supermarkets were chosen in clusters of no more than approximately 2 km apart so they'd be more likely to be competing with each other. Independent supermarkets were included if they were within 5 km of another supermarket.
- To determine whether basket prices had increased or decreased since 2003, the prices of the 24 products that are comparable between this year's survey and the 2003 survey were analysed.

Table 1. Store by store, what the basket cost, and the increase from 2003 (including specials).

Store*	2007 basket price ($)	% increase**
Adelaide, SA		
1 Coles, Elizabeth	96.19	7
2 Coles, Kilkenny	98.77	na
3 Coles, Glenelg	99.31	9
4 Foodland IGA, Elizabeth	101.63	12
5 Woolworths, Kilkenny	102.38	13
6 Woolworths, Glenelg	103.09	13
7 Woolworths, Elizabeth	105.66	17
Albany, WA		
1 Coles, Albany	98.65	8
2 Woolworths, Albany	107.80	16
3 Spencer Park Supa IGA, Albany	108.31	na
Ballarat, Vic		
1 Coles, Ballarat	98.62	na
2 Safeway, Ballarat	105.06	na
3 Ryans Supa IGA, Ballarat	105.43	na
Brisbane, Qld		
1 Coles, Chermside	95.96	na
2 Coles, Upper Mt Gravatt	96.39	5
3 Coles, Kenmore	96.99	4
4 Coles, Browns Plains	97.20	5
5 Supa IGA, Regents Park	100.29	na
6 Woolworths, Browns Plains	103.91	11
7 Woolworths, Upper Mt Gravatt	104.55	10
8 Woolworths, Chermside	104.6	na
9 Woolworths, Kenmore	105.57	12
Canberra, ACT		
1 Coles, Belconnen	97.75	8
2 Coles, Tuggeranong	98.40	na
3 Coles, Phillip	100.48	10
4 Woolworths, Phillip	105.48	13
5 Woolworths, Tuggeranong	105.58	na
6 Woolworths, Belconnen	107.69	18
Central Coast, NSW		
1 Coles, Woy Woy	97.41	6
2 Coles,Tuggerah	98.51	8
3 Woolworths, Tuggerah	106.21	15
4 Woolworths, Woy Woy	107.44	18
Darwin, NT		
1 Coles, Karama	98.93	4
2 Woolworths, Leanyer	107.73	15
Dubbo, NSW		
1 Coles, Dubbo	99.52	7
2 Woolworths, Dubbo	107.76	15
3 Dubbo West IGA, Dubbo	121.71	na

Store*	2007 basket price ($)	% increase**
Forster, NSW		
1 Coles, Forster	96.02	na
2 Woolworths, Forster	104.67	na
Geelong, Vic		
1 Coles, Corio	96.81	7
2 Coles, Belmont	97.85	4
3 Coles, Geelong	98.92	na
4 Safeway, Corio	105.07	11
5 Safeway, Geelong West	105.55	na
6 IGA Champions, Geelong West	107.02	na
Gold Coast, Qld		
1 Coles, Elanora	94.83	2
2 Coles, Nerang	95.89	3
3 Woolworths, Elanora	99.9	7
4 Woolworths, Nerang	100.71	12
5 IGA Highland Park, Nerang	112.75	na
Hobart, Tas		
1 Coles, New Town	101.38	na
2 Coles, Sandy Bay	101.75	5
3 Woolworths, Sandy Bay	109.28	10
4 Woolworths, New Town	110.68	9
Launceston, Tas		
1 Coles, Kings Meadows	99.56	2
2 Coles, Launceston	101.59	3
3 Coles, Newstead	102.69	na
4 Woolworths, Kings Meadows	110.45	9
Melbourne, Vic		
1 Coles, Prahran	94.02	–1
2 Coles, Werribee	96.02	2
3 Coles, Doncaster East	96.83	na
4 Coles, Fountain Gate	99.34	na
5 Safeway, Werribee *	103.59	na
6 FoodWorks, Narre Warren South	103.83	na
7 Safeway, Broadmeadows	103.95	10
8 Ritchies IGA, Fountain Gate	104.53	na
9 Safeway, Fountain Gate	106.93	na
10 Safeway, Prahran	107.04	13
11 Safeway, Doncaster East	107.26	na
Mt Gambier, SA		
1 Coles, Mt Gambier	96.91	6
2 Woolworths, Mt Gambier	104.62	15
Newcastle, NSW		
1 Coles, Belmont	95.65	8
2 Coles, The Junction	96.18	na
3 Coles, Charlestown	96.99	na
4 Woolworths, Charlestown	104.73	na
5 Woolworths, Mount Hutton	105.58	18

Store*	2007 basket price ($)	% increase**
Perth, WA		
1 Coles, Wanneroo	98.23	na
2 Coles, Fremantle	98.35	7
3 Coles, Midland	98.59	7
4 Woolworths, South Fremantle	102.85	na
5 Woolworths, Midland	106.86	na
6 Woolworths, Cottesloe	106.97	na
7 Supa IGA, Midland	107.92	na
8 Supa IGA, East Fremantle	110.32	na
9 Wanneroo IGA, Wanneroo	110.50	na
Rockhampton, Qld		
1 Coles, North Rockhampton	96.40	na
2 Supa IGA, North Rockhampton	98.50	na
3 Woolworths, North Rockhampton	103.88	na
Sydney, NSW		
1 Coles, Blacktown	95.67	4
2 Coles, Castle Hill	96.98	na
3 Coles, Liverpool	97.30	5
4 Coles, Hurstville	97.62	9
5 Coles, Hornsby	98.15	6
6 Coles, Bondi Junction	98.70	na
7 Woolworths, Bondi Junction	105.42	na
8 Woolworths, Blacktown	105.97	15
9 Woolworths, Liverpool	107.24	17
10 Woolworths, Hornsby	107.55	14
11 Supa IGA, Castle Hill	113.27	na
Townsville, Qld		
1 Coles, Aitkenvale	96.71	4
2 IGA, Aitkenvale	103.58	na
3 Woolworths, Aitkenvale	105.27	15
Wagga Wagga, NSW		
1 Coles, Wagga Wagga	97.60	na
2 Woolworths, Wagga Wagga	109.92	na
Wodonga, Vic		
1 Coles, Wodonga	101.26	9
2 Safeway, Wodonga	110.02	18
Wollongong, NSW		
1 Coles, Figtree	97.49	5
2 Coles, Corrimal	99.24	8
3 Woolworths, Figtree	106.15	15
4 Woolworths, Corrimal	108.76	17

na Not applicable — our shoppers didn't visit this store in 2003.

** Only one Aldi store was visited because it has a single-price policy across all its stores. Its basket cost $55.70.*

*** % increase based on a basket of 24 goods that are the same in the 2003 and 2007 surveys.*

< Prices Australia-wide

In the last nine CHOICE supermarket surveys (back to 1991) Newcastle in NSW was the cheapest city for grocery shopping. This year it was knocked off its perch by Rockhampton in Queensland, which had the survey's lowest average basket price of $99.59, including specials. It's only marginal, though — Newcastle's basket is still very close at $99.83. See Table 2, left, for results for all the surveyed cities.

And there's general good news for Queenslanders: it's taken over from SA as the cheapest state for supermarket shopping. Again, it's close, and SA isn't far behind, but it's an interesting change. The next time we do a supermarket price survey we'll be interested to find out whether this is a continuing trend or just a one-off finding caused by the specific items and stores we included.

Tasmanians are still paying the most for groceries, with their average basket costing $104.67. WA was only a few cents cheaper, ousting the Northern Territory from second-most-expensive slot.

And NSW shoppers are probably noticing the biggest impact on their pockets — this state moved from second-cheapest in 2003 to fifth position this year. That makes it the most expensive state apart from the NT, WA and Tasmania, whose higher prices are likely to be due at least in part to transport costs. Full state results are in Table 3, below. ■

Table 2. Cheapest cities in 2007 compared to 2003*

Rank 2007	Rank 2003	City	2007 average basket price ($)**
1	na	Rockhampton	99.59
2	1	Newcastle	99.83
3	na	Forster	100.35
4	8	Brisbane	100.61
5	3	Mt Gambier	100.77
6	10	Gold Coast	100.82
7	2	Adelaide	101.00
8	4	Townsville	101.85
9	13	Geelong	101.87
10	14	Melbourne	102.12
11	11	Sydney	102.17
12	9	Central Coast	102.39
13	17	Canberra	102.56
14	12	Wollongong	102.91
15	na	Ballarat	103.04
16	19	Darwin	103.33
17	23	Launceston	103.57
18	na	Wagga Wagga	103.76
19	21	Perth	104.51
20	5	Albany	104.92
21	18	Wodonga	105.64
22	24	Hobart	105.77
23	22	Dubbo	109.66

na Not applicable — not surveyed in 2003.
** Aldi not included.*
*** Including specials.*

Table 3: Cheapest states in 2007 compared to 2003*

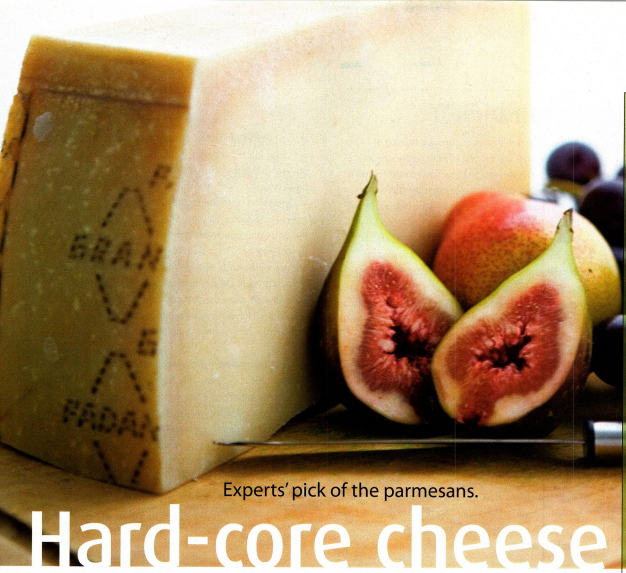
Rank 2007	Rank 2003	State (number of stores 2007/2003)	2007 average basket price ($)**
1	3	Queensland (20/24)	100.69
2	1	SA (9/11)	100.95
3	4	Victoria (22/27)	102.50
4	5	ACT (6/6)	102.56
5	2	NSW (31/38)	102.63
6	7	NT (2/3)	103.33
7	6	WA (12/17)	104.61
8	8	Tasmania (8/7)	104.67

** Aldi not included.*
*** Including specials.*

Times are a-changin'

It's been a busy four years in the supermarket industry since our last survey:

- Coles Group (which acquired the chain Bi-Lo in the late 1980s) has begun converting all Bi-Lo stores into Coles supermarkets.
- Coles has also made public its intention to sell the company, which also includes Target, Kmart, Officeworks and Liquorland.
- Foodland Australia Limited (FAL) was the supplier to supermarkets such as Dewsons and Supa Valu and had a supermarket division called Action. It's now been taken over by Metcash (supplier to IGA) and as a result most Action supermarkets have been converted to IGA supermarkets. Most of the supermarkets that used to be supplied by FAL in WA also agreed to adopt the IGA banner.
- A merger between FoodWorks and Australian United Retailers (AUR) resulted in all AUR stores (such as Buy Rite and Cut Price) being rebranded as FoodWorks.
- Aldi has continued to grow since 2003, expanding in NSW, the ACT, Victoria and Queensland. It now has approximately 140 stores across the east coast of Australia.
- Both Coles and Woolworths/Safeway have released their own private-label products, which is resulting in other smaller brands being dropped from their shelves.



Experts' pick of the parmesans.

Hard-core cheese

Australia has come a long way from the days when 'parmesan', for many of us, meant the shelf-stable, sickly-smelling powdered variety in a canister that you sprinkled on your spaghetti bolognese.

Now, with many more specialist delis, providores and cheesemongers around, the options are endless by comparison — in a good store you might be able to choose from parmesans made in different seasons, or be offered one from the retailer's favourite producer in Mantua to the east of the Po River, for example.

Even supermarkets stock a variety of brands. But do you have to go to a deli to get a great parmesan, or are the prepacked wedges sold in supermarkets just as good?

We asked experts to taste 18 parmesans sold nationally in supermarkets. For comparison they also tasted nine parmesans cut from the wheel in providores, delis and upmarket department stores — several of them brands you'll only find in delis, although they're widely available.

We couldn't test every small brand stocked in delis around the country, though. So while our *What to buy* list makes a good starting point, we'd encourage you >

WHAT TO BUY

From delis (cut from the wheel, no pic available)

ZANETTI Parmigiano Reggiano

AURICCHIO Parmigiano Reggiano

From supermarkets (prepacked)

SOUTH CAPE Grana Padano

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

IN A NUTSHELL

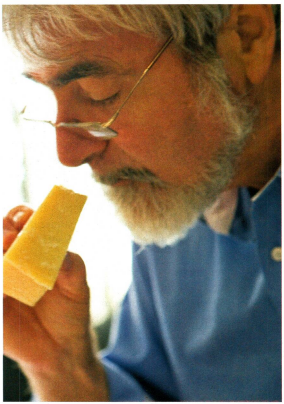
- **You don't have to go to a deli to get good parmesan — one of our experts' favourites is a prepacked parmesan nationally available in supermarkets.**
- **Getting a wedge cut from the wheel should ensure quality cheese. But taste it first and know what to look for (from this article) to get the best.**

Jargon buster

- **Aging** Often referred to as curing, maturing or ripening, aging is the process of holding cheeses in controlled environments to allow flavour development and change in texture. These changes are due to the activity of natural milk enzymes and the development of micro-organisms.
- **Bitter** An unpleasant, biting flavour — usually an aftertaste. A bitter aftertaste is sometimes associated with variations in manufacturing and curing or aging procedures.
- **Close** A word used to describe how compact the body of a cheese is. Parmesan cheese should be 'close' rather than 'open'.
- **Culture (starter)** Starter cultures speed and control the process of curdling milk during cheesemaking, in part by converting lactose (milk sugar) to lactic acid, which over time results in the formation of white calcium lactate crystals (see *Grainy*, below). Starter cultures also lend unique flavour characteristics to the cheese. The starter for Parmigiano Reggiano and Grana Padano is a natural culture of lactic ferments from the whey produced by the initial cheese-making process.
- **Eyes** The technical name for holes formed in cheese after fermentation. Swiss cheeses are best known for their large eyes. Eyes in parmesan aren't desirable.
- **Grainy** A descriptive term for the granular texture created by calcium lactate crystals, which are the product of long aging. It's desirable in parmesan, though not to the point of grittiness, which indicates excessive numbers of these crystals.
- **Lipolytic** A word used to describe the flavour created by the enzyme **lipase** releasing fatty acids from butterfat in the process of **'controlled rancidity'**. The desired lipolytic flavour may be mild or sharp depending on the cheese age. Some cheeses, such as Romano, gain much of their flavour from fatty acids. Others, such as cheddar, aren't supposed to have flavours caused by fatty acids in high concentrations. Undesired lipolytic flavours produced from unwanted micro-organisms or from using old milk are referred to as 'rancidity'.
- **Rind** The outside of a cheese. The rind acts as a barrier between the cheese and the outside environment, while sometimes imparting a flavour of its own. Natural rind is one that develops naturally on the cheese exterior through drying while ripening, without the aid of ripening agents or washing. Most semi-firm or hard cheeses have natural rinds, which may be thin like that of cheddar or thick like that of parmesan.
- **Whey** The thin, watery part of milk that separates from the coagulated curds during the first step of the cheesemaking process. It contains most of the milk sugar or lactose found in milk.

THE COST OF CONVENIENCE

Our experts tasted two brands of shaved parmesan sold nationally in supermarkets. MIL LEL beat the 'rubbery', 'yellow', 'cheddar-like' PERFECT ITALIANO, but neither scored well and MIL LEL was still criticised for being 'chewy' and 'bland'. Shaved parmesan has more surface area and dries out quickly once exposed to the air. So if you want good flavour and texture you're better off shaving it fresh from the block — a vegie peeler will do the trick.



< to get out there and try other parmesans on offer. See *Buying parmesan…*, below, for tips.

Finding the favourites

Our expert tasters had their personal likes and dislikes, but a few parmesans stood out as overall favourites. Most of the higher-scoring cheeses were cut direct from the wheel, and several are brands you can't get in supermarkets. However, a supermarket cheese — SOUTH CAPE Grana Padano — was one of our experts' top three choices. See the table, page 17, for full results.

The experts judged each cheese on its flavour and aroma, texture and appearance. The parmesans listed in *What to buy* are those that got the top scores overall.

Parmesan by any other name

In Australia we use the word 'parmesan' generically to describe a class of mature, hard cheeses with a granular texture, collectively known as 'grana'.

The two best known examples of grana are Parmigiano Reggiano and Grana Padano, and both have protected designation of origin (PDO) status. This means that by law, only cheese made in designated Italian provinces may be labelled as such. Producers of these cheeses belong to consortiums that oversee the production and quality of the cheese, checking it's made in accordance with strict criteria and meets a range of specifications. So with authentic Parmigiano Reggiano and Grana Padano you know what you're getting.

These two types are made in similar ways, both from raw milk, but there are key differences. For example, skimmed evening milk is added to full-cream morning milk to make Parmigiano Reggiano, whereas all milk for Grana Padano is skimmed, so it's slightly lower in fat.

Parmigiano Reggiano is often aged longer than Grana Padano, which can make it more expensive — as a rule of thumb, the older the cheese, the pricier it is.

'Parmesan', on the other hand, isn't a protected or defined term, and you'll see it on the label of parmesan-style cheeses made in Australia. They may not taste like 'authentic' Italian parmesan — our experts, who didn't know which brands they were tasting, almost without fail commented that the Australian cheeses were 'lacking parmesan character'. But you may prefer the flavour. Of the Australian parmesans in our test, the MIL LEL range scored highest.

Buying parmesan …

Use these tips to help you buy:

- Before buying a precut wedge from the supermarket, check the pack is tightly sealed — any exposure to air results in oxidation, which compromises quality.
- A specialist deli or cheesemonger might offer more choice, and you can ask to taste a sample before you buy. A good retailer should be able to tell you about the cheese — how old it is and where it's from, for example. >

Meet the experts

Top row, left to right:

- Russell Smith, Specialty Cheese Consultant with Flavours Culinary Academy, has judged in cheese competitions nationally.
- Neil Willman, Director of Cheese Expertise, conducts cheese courses and training programs across Australia, and has judged cheese and other dairy products at competitions nationally and internationally.
- Don Sandman, Tasmanian Dairy Industry Authority Quality Assurance Manager, is a dairy technologist and has judged in many cheese and dairy shows.

Bottom row, left to right:

- Sophie Classon, cheese expert and consultant to the industry, runs cheese seminars and workshops for Richmond Hill Cafe & Larder Cheese Room in Melbourne.
- Roberta Muir, Manager of Sydney Seafood School, has a Master's degree in gastronomy and is a trained judge of both olive oil and cheese.
- Joanna Saville, food journalist and food TV presenter/producer, is a trained judge of both olive oil and cheese.

Of the Australian parmesans in the test, the three Mil Lel products came top. They're available in supermarkets.

If you've only got a cheap block of parmesan, parmesan chips are delicious, and dead easy to make. Place heaped tablespoons of grated parmesan onto a tray lined with baking paper. Cook at 160°C for 8–10 minutes — or until dark golden — then cool and serve the chips with your favourite dip, or simply on their own.

PARMESAN TRIVIA

- **During production, parmesan is immersed in brine (a solution of water and salt) for about 20 days to flavour the cheese and permit its long aging.**
- **Parmesan has one of the lowest cholesterol levels of any cheese.**
- **A wheel of parmesan is divided up using a special triangular-bladed knife. It's designed to split the cheese into wedges rather than cut it, in order to preserve its natural texture and expose as much surface area as possible.**

< • Parmesan should taste sweet, slightly fruity and slightly 'lipolytic'. It should have a firm, dry and 'close' body (no openings). Despite its granular structure it should have a smooth texture that melts in your mouth. Depending on the age, it can be pale and creamy (if it's young) to a deep straw-yellow (at 2–3 years).

• Common faults include being overly lipolytic, stale, over/undersalted, lacking flavour, having a weak or open body, or suffering from free moisture, surface discolouration or excessive lactic acid (which shows as calcium lactate crystals). For an explanation of these terms, see *Jargon buster*, page 14.

• If you're after authentic Italian parmesan look for the branding on the rind: Parmigiano Reggiano or Grana Padano is imprinted in dots on the rind (see the photo, page 13) along with the producer's number and the month and year of production. Each wheel is inspected individually to ensure it meets the necessary standards before it's sent for sale. Cheeses that pass the test are heat-branded on the rind with the consortium's logo. Parmigiano Reggiano wheels whose testing indicates that they're best eaten young are marked with parallel grooves around the circumference of the wheel. They're known as 'Parmigiano Reggiano Prima Stagionatura'.

• Older doesn't necessarily mean better — it's really down to individual preference and what you're using it for. The more mature the parmesan, the stronger the flavour, and the drier, crumblier and grainier the texture.

• If the cheese is sold precut, chances are you won't know when it was produced, although some brands have 'aged for a minimum of…' or 'matured for…' and the number of months on the label. The Parmigiano Reggiano consortium this year authorised the use of stamps that indicate the minimum maturity of its parmesans (lobster-coloured for more than 18 months' maturation, silver for more than 22 months and gold for more than 30). But use of the stamps is optional.

… storing it …

Unless you have a cool, damp cellar with a constant temperature, the best place to store parmesan is in the warmest part of the fridge, at about 4°C. Advice varies as to how cheese should be wrapped. Aficionados would have you keep any cuts from whole wheels wrapped in wax paper or clean, damp cotton cloth to allow the cheese to breathe and avoid it sweating. But wrapping parmesan in cling film or foil is perfectly OK, according to the consortiums.

What's certain is that quality soon deteriorates after parmesan is cut from the wheel, or the vacuum pack is opened and it's exposed to the air. And as ideal cheese storage conditions are difficult to replicate at home, it's best to only buy enough for use within a few days of purchase.

… and serving it

Parmesan is best known as a grating cheese, and is wonderful sprinkled over pasta dishes or stirred into soup or risottos. But don't stop there. If you've spent money on good-quality parmesan, try serving it as parmesan petals in a salad, or make it the feature of a cheese board.

Younger parmesans are ideal served with dry white wines and as an accompaniment to fresh fruit such as pears and green apples. Older parmesans go well with red wines or dessert wines, and are great served with prunes and dried figs or in chunks drizzled with a good-quality balsamic vinegar. Just don't serve it straight from the fridge — take it out an hour or so beforehand, unwrap it and let it breathe in order to accentuate its aroma and flavour.

For recipe suggestions, and details of parmesan producers and how the cheese is made, go to the consortium websites:

- www.parmigiano-reggiano.it.
- www.granapadano.com. ■

PRODUCT		RATINGS		DETAILS	
Brand / product (in rank order)	**Place of purchase**	**Score**	**Tasters' comments**	**Origin**	**Price / kg ($)**
Zanetti Parmigiano Reggiano	Deli	17	Good aroma, sweet, some fruitiness, dry, good grainy structure, lactate crystals showing; salty	Italy	25.00
Auricchio Parmigiano Reggiano	Deli	16	Sweet, texture is dry, crumbly, occasional crunch, good presentation; very slightly short flavour	Italy	39.00
South Cape Grana Padano	Supermarket	16	Sweet, nutty, pleasant aftertaste, typical appearance; lacking full character	Italy	32.45
Rocca Grana Padano	Deli	15.5	Faint sweetness and fruitiness, some large crystals, good presentation; some openness	Italy	29.95
Auricchio Grana Padano	Deli	15	Good sweetness, some flavour complexity, caramel, good closed body, typical appearance	Italy	27.00
Biemme Parmigiano Reggiano	Deli	15	Fruity aroma and flavour, some nuttiness, good texture	Italy	69.95
Auricchio Grana Padano	Supermarket	14.5	Some sweetness but little overall balance, texture good inside; plasticky surface	Italy	42.60
Pieffe Parmigiano Reggiano	Deli	14.5	Good fruity flavour, sharpish lipase, flaky body, good granular texture, lots of lactate spotting, dark colour	Italy	45.95
Rocca Parmigiano Reggiano	Deli	14.5	Flaky, crumbles well, large spots of calcium lactate; atypical flavour	Italy	69.50
South Cape Parmigiano Reggiano	Supermarket	14.5	Slight caramel, fruity aroma, some nuttiness, good closed body, honey colour	Italy	49.95
Zanetti Grana Padano	Deli	14.5	Good presentation; slightly bitter, slightly gritty	Italy	15.00
Mil Lel Extra Aged Parmesan	Supermarket	14	Sweet aroma, slightly fruity, lacks some parmesan character but not bad; slightly open texture	Australia	25.00
Mil Lel Parmesan	Supermarket	14	Sweet flavour; lacking parmesan character, buttery, cheddar-like appearance	Australia	17.80
Mil Lel Superior Real Australian Grana Parmesan	Supermarket	14	Sweet; slightly buttery, high fat, open body, some free whey, very orange	Australia	28.00
Wattle Valley Grana Padano	Supermarket	14	Slightly nutty aroma, good flaky texture; slightly bitter, unbalanced at the end	Italy	31.90
Zanetti Grana Padano	Supermarket	14	Lacks sweetness and full balance, not complex, slightly open body, glossy appearance	Italy	28.00
Auricchio Parmigiano Reggiano	Supermarket	13	Dry; earthy barnyard aroma, very atypical, oxidised flavour, rind is oily	Italy	50.05
Emilgrana Grana Padano	Supermarket (Aldi)	13	Lacks flavour development, salty finish, slightly gritty, too pale	Italy	22.00
Pieffe Grana Padano	Deli	13	Good closed body; lacking flavour, doesn't look like aged cheese	Italy	29.95
Virgilio Grana Padano	Supermarket	13	Bitter, very slightly sandy mouthfeel, smooth waxy finish	Italy	35.85
Wattle Valley Parmigiano Reggiano	Supermarket	13	Good grainy texture; poorly balanced flavour, slightly rancid aroma, slightly grey appearance	Italy	43.90
Delre Parmesan Authentically Italian	Supermarket	12.5	Lacks flavour, rubbery, quite dark, cheddar-type appearance	Italy	29.70
Perfect Italiano Extra Sharp Parmesan	Supermarket	12.5	One-dimensional flavour, overly salty, looks like plastic cheese	Australia	21.95
Zanetti Parmigiano Reggiano	Supermarket	12.5	Fruity/fermented flavour, slightly gritty, shiny due to packing	Italy	34.00
Pantalica Parmesan Cheese Italian Style	Supermarket	11	Lacking parmesan flavour, slight rancidity, high moisture, very yellow, looks a lot like a 'fake' toy cheese	Australia	20.00
Perfect Italiano Parmesan	Supermarket	10	Lacking parmesan flavour, chewy, waxy, rubbery, very yellow, looks like a wedge of processed cheddar	Australia	17.15
South Cape Australian Parmesan	Supermarket	9.5	Unbalanced, excess lipase, wet open texture — wouldn't grate well, doesn't look like a parmesan	Australia	25.80

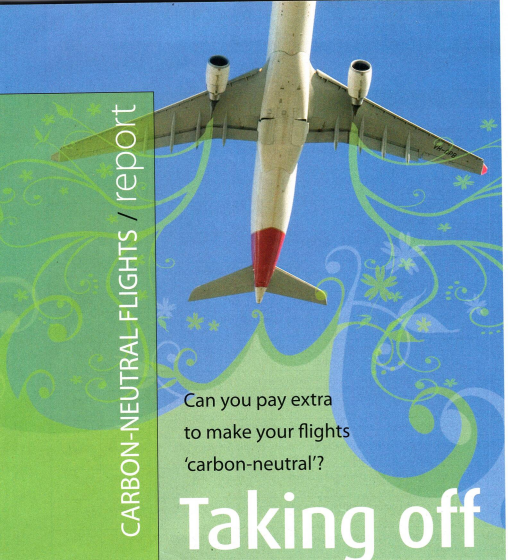
USING THE TABLE

Place of purchase The parmesans we bought from supermarkets were all prepacked. The remaining parmesans are widely available in delis, provedores and upmarket department stores and were cut from the wheel at the time of purchase. All cheese was purchased within one week of the tasting and stored in identical conditions.

Score The experts tasted the cheeses (without knowing the brands) and agreed on a score, following a 20-point system similar to that used in judging cheese shows. The panel also commented on the flavour and aroma, texture and appearance of each cheese, and the tasters' comments in the table are compiled from what they said.

Tasters' comments See *Jargon buster*, page 14, for an explanation of cheese vocabulary.

Price This is what we paid in March 2007. Use it as a guide only, as the price of cheese, in delis in particular, can vary considerably.



GENE ROSS/MICHELLE HAVENSTEIN/CYNTHIA NGE

Can you pay extra to make your flights 'carbon-neutral'?

Taking off

IN A NUTSHELL

- **If you can't reduce the number of flights you take to reduce your carbon emissions, an increasing number of travel companies and airlines are offering carbon-neutral flights. Do they work?**
- **The carbon offset market is new and poorly regulated, leaving it open to varying standards. Make sure you understand what you're paying for and the benefits it will provide.**

These days climate change, and what we can do as individuals to address it, is on everyone's mind. But even if you have an energy-efficient home, regularly walk or cycle to work, recycle waste and buy GreenPower electricity, one return flight to Europe could effectively undo all your good work. One long-haul flight could cause the same or more greenhouse gas emissions per person than a whole year's electricity use in your home.

According to tour operator INTREPID TRAVEL (an advocate of 'responsible tourism'), the travel industry is the fastest-growing contributor to carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions in the world. Experts say the global warming effect of airplanes could be two to four times higher than other forms of transport, as the emissions occur at higher altitudes. But is it possible to fly guilt-free by buying 'carbon offsets'?

Enter carbon-neutral flights. The idea is you negate the environmental damage your flight has caused by paying to remove a quantity of carbon equal to the emissions your seat on the flight was responsible for. The extra money you pay may be put towards tree-planting schemes to 'soak up' the CO_2 emitted by planes, invested in renewable energy schemes, such as wind and solar power generators, may fund schemes for methane capture or to improve energy efficiency.

What does it cost?

The price of carbon offsets varies wildly because of how different companies calculate emissions, the type of offsets they sell, and their prices. The carbon impact of flying also appears to differ greatly, depending on the calculator and assumptions you use. Using different websites to calculate the carbon impact of a flight can give widely different answers; these calculations are rarely subject to independent verification.

For example, when we checked in April, we got the following results for the carbon impact and offset price for a return flight from Melbourne to London (around 33,000 km round trip) from four Australian websites:

- CLIMATE FRIENDLY Its calculator estimates the emissions from the trip at 10 tonnes. It'd charge $220.95 to make this return trip carbon-neutral.
- EASY BEING GREEN For a flat price of $88 for long international flights of up to 40,000 km, the company says it will "reduce greenhouse gas pollution by 4.4 tonnes". You'll also receive 'carbon neutral' luggage tags and a certificate.
- ELEMENTREE calculates the flights' impact as 5 tonnes and says it will plant and protect 21 trees on your behalf for $52.50.
- GREENFLEET Its calculator estimates the 'total warming impact' (including indirect effects of releasing greenhouse gases high in the atmosphere) at 12.1 tonnes, which it equates to 46 trees. This includes greenhouse gas emissions from fuel use only of 4.7 tonnes, equating to 18 trees. The cost to offset the 'total warming impact' is $108.23, or $42.35 to offset the emissions from the fuel.

What you get

A key problem for consumers is there's little regulation and no clearly defined standard for carbon offset schemes. For example:

- CLIMATE FRIENDLY (the most expensive company in our example), says its prices reflect the high quality of its offsets, which are Gold Standard renewable energy credits. That's a standard for international renewable energy developed by environmental groups around the world. CLIMATE FRIENDLY also sells accredited GreenPower (renewable energy).
- EASY BEING GREEN's offsets are accredited under both the NSW Greenhouse Gas

Abatement Scheme and the Federal Government's Greenhouse Friendly program (see below). The company uses your money to install energy-saving technologies, such as lightbulbs, in homes and businesses.

- ELEMENTREE funds tree-planting and isn't accredited under any recognised scheme. However, one of its commercial reforestation schemes for the generation of certified carbon credits for the international carbon market is currently under audit by the Greenhouse Friendly program. The company says consumers will be able to buy certified carbon credits from certified projects in 2008.
- GREENFLEET, a not-for-profit charitable trust and registered environmental organisation that's been around longer than most of its competitors, offers customers carbon neutrality through planting native forests and promoting fuel-efficient technologies and low-carbon fuels. It doesn't have accreditation for its offsets but is seeking this from Greenhouse Friendly.

Controversial industry

But even green groups don't agree on whether carbon offsets are a good way to counteract environmental damage. As long as there's no single mandatory or widely accepted standard for what qualifies as an offset, it's hard to know whether what you're being sold will really offset emissions. Critics point to a lack of transparency, standardisation and quality control in offset schemes. There are few restrictions on what companies can offer, and little regulation of the truth and credibility of some environmental claims. The Climate Group, an international NGO, has developed a voluntary carbon standard, expected to launch later this year, which may improve the situation.

However, some argue that offsetting the emissions from flights simply doesn't work. Environmentalist George Monbiot writes that what's needed is a new type of fuel and a massive increase in fuel efficiency. In the meantime, his solution is extreme — he thinks most planes flying today should be grounded because of the environmental damage they cause.

Tree-planting doubts

A particular type of offset that's come in for criticism is tree-planting and forestry schemes — there's disagreement over whether it's an effective way to offset carbon emissions. Arguably, it's better to invest in renewable energy to replace coal-fired power, instead of trying to offset environmental damage after it's happened.

It's hard to know whether trees will store enough carbon, and whether the carbon will remain stored, especially when offsets are unregulated. The trees aren't guaranteed to survive — one bushfire could suddenly release all the carbon stored for your offsets. Or consider what happened to rock band Coldplay, for example, which tried to offset some of the environmental damage caused by the production of its album *A Rush of Blood to the Head*, but suffered an embarrassment when many of the mango trees planted in India withered and died.

Another concern with some tree-planting projects is that they can take decades to deliver on their environmental promises. The Total Environment Centre is critical of tree-planting schemes as a way to offset the damage caused by flights. "The problem is your airline trip emits pollution now, but tree sequestration of carbon would take up to 100 years, and you don't know that those trees will even still be around by then," it says.

Consumers need independent, reliable guarantees about the long-term viability of projects they're funding — and about what those projects will really achieve.

The bottom line

Offsetting your carbon emissions isn't really the primary target — prevention is better than cure and almost everyone agrees that we need to reduce our emissions now. So, if you can, the best thing to do is take fewer flights. Other than that, the Australian Conservation Foundation (acfonline.org.au) recommends first trying to reduce your own emissions by using energy efficiently in your home and car. Second, buy renewable energy (see *Flick the green switch*, CHOICE, June 2007, for the best products and prices).

Finally, offset the rest, including your flights, but choose your offset scheme carefully. There are big differences in where they invest your money, how much of your money is invested in projects, their prices, how long it'll take for the project to offset your emissions, whether the offsets are independently audited and their source of accreditation (if any).

Without proper regulation or standardisation, it's hard to know which carbon-offset scheme to go for. You can't compare products with confidence. Standardisation (possibly through regulation) of this fast-growing industry is vital, so you can know what you're buying is bona fide, and to help you compare offers. ■

WHO'S DOING WHAT?

There are around 17 carbon offset providers in Australia, and now airlines and travel companies are getting in on the act:

- **VIRGIN BLUE offers carbon-neutral domestic flights certified by Greenhouse Friendly. BRITISH AIRWAYS and Scandinavia's SAS are international airlines that provide offsets.**
- **All flights from Australia sold by INTREPID TRAVEL have a carbon offset payment included in their price. The money goes towards projects run by Origin Energy aimed at lowering CO_2 emissions.**
- **FLIGHT CENTRE gives customers the option of offsetting their flights, selling offsets from a company called CLEANER CLIMATE.**

Greenhouse Friendly scheme

The Greenhouse Friendly logo (below) tells you that a product, service or business meets the standards set by the Australian Greenhouse Office (AGO). According to the AGO, if you buy products it's certified, you're assured all the related emissions have been offset, or balanced out, by other activities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. A range of projects to offset emissions is covered, including:

- Energy efficiency measures.
- Waste diversion and recycling.
- Forestry activities, including tree-planting and reforestation.

More details of the scheme can be found at greenhouse.gov.au/greenhousefriendly or by calling 1300 130 606.

Join our campaign to make your objections heard and reclaim excessive penalty fees.

Reclaim unfair bank fees

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Some bank penalty fees are excessive — they seem to be higher than the problem would cost the bank — and therefore unfair and probably legally unenforceable.**
- **CHOICE and the Consumer Action Law Centre have launched a joint campaign to help consumers reclaim penalty fees.**

Are you being stung by high penalties for overdrawing your account, paying your credit card bill a day late, or writing a cheque that bounces? You're not alone. Banks raked in over $4 billion in fees from consumers in 2006, an increase of 10% in one year, and that doesn't include similar fees that other financial institutions like building societies, credit unions and non-bank lenders are charging.

Some of these fees — for exceeding your credit card limit, overdrawing your account and having a direct debit dishonoured, for example — are excessive (they seem to be a lot higher than the problem would cost the bank) and therefore unfair, and probably legally unenforceable. That's why we're starting a campaign to help you reclaim them.

Penalties on the rise

CHOICE first highlighted this problem in 2005, following a report by Consumer Law Centre Victoria (now Consumer Action Law Centre) that demanded action from industry and regulators (see *Legally unenforceable?*, far right). But since that report, the overall fees households pay, including penalties, have increased — Figure 1 on the right shows how we now pay $1.6 billion of fees on deposit accounts each year, an increase of 45% between 2002 and 2006.

The increase in credit card fee income for the banks was even more dramatic — it jumped 140% during the same period. According to data from the Reserve Bank of Australia (see Table 1, far right), the average late credit card payment fee seven years ago was $20 and there were few, if any, fees for exceeding your credit limit. Now, the big five banks charge an average of $32 for late payments and $30 for exceeding a credit limit.

Table 2, far right, shows account penalties from the five largest banks in Australia. These are the fees charged on standard accounts; some banks have reduced the penalty fees on concession and basic accounts.

To give some examples, since 2005 WESTPAC's bank account penalties have increased by 25–33% and its credit card penalties by 16–40%. ST GEORGE credit card penalties increased by 40–50% during those two years. ANZ reduced its dishonour fee from $45 to $35, but increased its overdrawn account fee from $29.50 to $35.

In some cases, bank penalties are charged to customers' accounts multiple times in the same day.

BANKWEST, for example, charges a $45 dishonour fee for each transaction that would cause your account to be overdrawn, not just for the first, subject to a maximum of $135 per day (see *It's in the T&Cs* on page 23 for an example).

Some other penalties are also blatantly unfair, and it's not just banks that charge them. The largest credit union, CREDIT UNION AUSTRALIA (CUA), for example, charges *you* $20 when someone who writes you a cheque doesn't have enough money in *their* account to cover the transaction (the person who wrote the cheque would also be charged a penalty by their own financial institution). AUSTRALIAN CENTRAL CREDIT UNION charges $15. CUA told us the $20 fee, which is being reviewed, comprises $10 that it's charged by its bank and the rest is the credit union's cost to manually process the transaction. None of the big five banks charges this penalty; ST GEORGE dropped its $10.50 inward cheque dishonour fee in June after we highlighted it in our research for this article. However, credit unions claim that on average their penalty fees are lower than banks'.

Legally unenforceable?

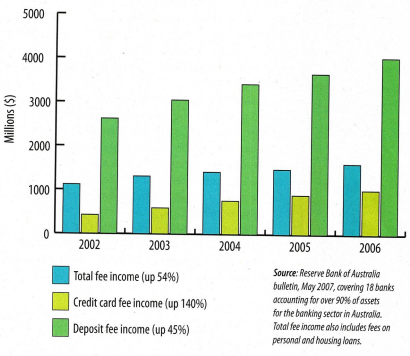
In 2004, a groundbreaking report by Nicole Rich, now of the Consumer Action Law Centre, argued and explained why some bank penalties are likely to be legally unenforceable.

"A contract penalty is considered 'excessive' — and therefore unenforceable — if it's not a genuine pre-estimate of the loss suffered by the bank as a result of the customer breaching a term in their contract," Nicole says. "And there's a second argument in Victoria, the only state with Unfair Contract Terms legislation, that some penalty fees represent an unfair contract term, making them null and void."

The crux of these legal arguments is over banks' costs. There's no publicly available evidence that banks' penalty fees are a genuine estimate of their costs. The banking industry says its costs (for example, to process direct debit dishonours or to honour transactions that cause your account to go overdrawn) are commercially sensitive and won't be released.

The total amount of that penalty fee income for the banks is also unclear, because banks' annual reports don't separate the income they receive from penalties from other fees (ATM withdrawal fees, account-keeping fees, etc). However, the Consumer Action Law Centre estimated the penalties were worth hundreds of millions of dollars each year. The Reserve Bank recently said 'other credit card fees' — which are mainly late payment fees, over-limit fees and foreign currency conversion fees — increased by 21% from 2005 to 2006. The RBA didn't separate out the penalty fees from other currency fees, but based on RBA figures we calculate these currency fees and penalties are worth over $360 million per year. >

Figure 1. Banks' rising fee income from households, 2002–2006



Source: Reserve Bank of Australia bulletin, May 2007, covering 18 banks accounting for over 90% of assets for the banking sector in Australia. Total fee income also includes fees on personal and housing loans.

Table 1. Credit card penalties 2000–2007

Fees	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007*
Late payment fee ($)	20	20	21	23	29	29	31	32
Over limit fee ($)	0	6	13	25	28	29	30	30

Source: 2000–2006 figures are from the Reserve Bank of Australia, based on average fees for major banks' credit cards.

** Fees for 2007 aren't available from the RBA figures; they're from CHOICE research based on the average of the five largest banks' fees (see Table 2).*

Table 2. Transaction account and credit card penalties, major five banks

Bank (in alphabetical order)	Periodic payment dishonour ($)	Direct debit dishonour ($)	Overdrawn account ($)	Cheque dishonour (outward) ($)	Stop cheque ($)*	Credit card late payment ($)	Credit card over limit ($)
ANZ	35	35	35	35	15	35	35
Commonwealth	35	35	30	35	15	25	25
National Australia	50	50	30 (A)	50	5–8	30	25
St George	45	45	38	45	8 / 15 (B)	35	30
Westpac	50	50	40	50	12	35	35

Source: Banks' fee schedules and product disclosure statements, May 2007.

** The fee usually depends on circumstances. There's often no fee if the cheque is lost, stolen or unsigned and you provide the cheque number, for example.*

(A) Charged per day, not per item.

(B) $15 for staff-assisted request; $8 to stop a cheque through phone or internet banking.

< We asked the Australian Bankers' Association (ABA) to comment on what critics view as penalties that are excessive, unfair and potentially illegal. "We recognise that there has been extensive community debate about these fees," it said. "The ABA's member banks will review their terms and conditions on relevant products by the end of July 2007."

The ABA also said member banks will soon provide more information and better disclosure of what it calls 'exception fees', making it easier for customers to compare fees between financial institutions. The ABA added that exception fees are avoidable and encourages consumers to check their account balance before making a transaction. See *Avoiding penalty fees*, far right, for our tips.

While better disclosure is welcome, CHOICE's view is that focusing on it as a solution to the penalty fees problem misses the point. The point is that the penalty fees are too high.

What needs to change

CHOICE wants urgent action to address the problem of penalty fees, including:

- **Inward cheque dishonour fees** should be eliminated. It's clearly not your fault if someone writes you a cheque when there isn't enough money in their account to cover it.
- **Direct debit dishonour fees** Financial institutions should give options to customers before processing transactions on accounts with insufficient funds, giving them an opportunity to avoid the fee. It's unfair to charge the customer for direct debit dishonours — the bank doesn't provide any service when an automatic payment like this is declined.
- **Over-limit credit card fees** should either be eliminated or set at a reasonable level (these fees didn't exist seven years ago and are now over $30). Customers should be notified that the transaction would cause their credit limit to be exceeded and be given an option to have the transaction declined at no cost, or processed with a reasonable fee.
- All other **penalty fees** should be related to actual costs incurred by the institution.
- All **basic/concession bank accounts** should eliminate or dramatically reduce penalty fees. You can open a basic/concession account if you have a Commonwealth Government Health Care, Seniors Health or Pensioner Concession Card — see *Avoiding penalty fees* for more.
- The **Reserve Bank of Australia** should collect data from financial institutions on the amount of their penalty fee income. This information should be published as a separate amount in its next report on bank fees.
- The **Banking and Financial Services Ombudsman** (BFSO) should be able to investigate consumer complaints about penalty fees and make a ruling on whether they're excessive and legally enforceable. At present, the BFSO says its terms of reference don't allow it to consider the amount of a disclosed default fee. CHOICE isn't convinced this is correct, but if it is, we think those terms of reference need to be reviewed. See the article at choice.com.au/banking for more information on this. ■

HOW TO JOIN OUR CAMPAIGN

Go to our free report at choice.com.au/fairfees to download forms to send to your local politician, your financial institution and the Banking and Financial Services Ombudsman.

"I get charged $45 for something as little as being $5 overdrawn."

"One third of my week's income went on penalty fees"

Lauren, who receives a pension, has paid hundreds of dollars in penalty fees. For example, she was recently charged $90 for outward payments that would have caused her account to become $25 overdrawn. "I had written a cheque for $20 but by the time it was processed my account had insufficient funds — so I was charged a $45 dishonour fee," she says. "I also made a $5 voluntary contribution to my super fund — a second $45 fee was the result.

"Having one third of my pension payment go on penalty fees that week was a lot," Lauren says. "And this often happens. I might forget a payment is coming out or think I've left enough money in my account, and so I go overdrawn and get charged $45 for something as little as being $5 overdrawn. I'm fed up with this and have paid hundreds in fees. I wouldn't mind a $10 or $20 fee, but $45 is a lot to someone on a limited income."

Lauren continued, "My sister, who's living in England, got about $500 back after complaining about being charged high fees for overdrawing her account." (See *UK action over illegal fees*, far right, for more).

Penalty fees hit people on a low income like Lauren in two ways: they're more likely to be charged them because their account always hovers close to being overdrawn, and the excessive amount of the fees hits them harder than people with a higher income. We suggested to Lauren that she check her eligibility for a 'basic' account that minimises these penalties.

PHOTO: COURTESY LAUREN LUCAS

Avoiding penalty fees

Here are some tips:

- **Contact your bank and ask for penalties to be reversed.** Some consumers have been successful at getting their penalty fees reversed or waived. Use our forms at choice.com.au/fairfees if you need help.
- **Know your account or card.** Be familiar with how penalty fees are applied so you've better odds of avoiding them.
- **Know your incomings and outgoings.** Check that expected payments have been made into your account, and be aware of the timing of direct debits, so that you have enough in your account to cover them.
- **Arrange for automatic payments to your credit card.** They can be handy to ensure you at least pay your minimum monthly amount due each month, to avoid late payment fees.
- **Choose an account** that charges lower penalties.
- **Open a basic account.** If you're eligible for a concession account, you can lower your general transaction fees, and some banks reduce your penalties too. Check what your financial institution offers — NATIONAL AUSTRALIA BANK, for example, waives overdrawn account, dishonour and periodical non-payment fees for Concession Card account holders (you can open this account if you have a current Pensioner Concession Card, Commonwealth Health Care Card, Commonwealth Seniors Health Card or Veterans' Affairs Card). ANZ's Basic Account customers pay lower penalty fees (some are reduced to $10), while WESTPAC's dishonour fee on basic, student and youth accounts is $25 instead of its usual $50, and its overdrawn fee for these accounts is $20 instead of $40.

"It's in the T&Cs"

Henry's account slipped into the red when an ATM withdrawal caused an overdraft of $5. The penalty for overdrawing his account was $38, and when he checked his balance a few days later, he discovered that he'd been charged a further $90 in 'periodic debit dishonour' fees.

"I called the customer enquiry line and was told that all these fees are detailed in my terms and conditions (T&Cs)," Henry says. "I was informed that staff didn't have to explain to me why it costs them $38 to send me a one-page letter reminding me I'd overdrawn my account by $5, or why this entitled them to issue two further $45 penalties for direct debit dishonours. I was charged the $45 fee twice in the same day."

A further twist to Henry's situation was that he was the holder of a student account. "This was supposedly a fee-free, discounted account that's marketed to tertiary students as a cheap way to manage typical everyday transactions such as direct debits."

Henry sent a letter of complaint to the bank about the penalties he was charged, but didn't receive a response.

"I was informed that staff didn't have to explain to me why it costs them $38 to send me a one-page letter reminding me I'd overdrawn my account by $5."

LINCOLN BAKER

TRAVERS GRAHAM

UK ACTION OVER ILLEGAL FEES

In 2006 the UK Office of Fair Trading (OFT) investigated credit card default charges there and found they'd been set at a "significantly higher level than is legally fair". It estimated that illegal penalty charges of £300 million (over $700 million) had been charged and told UK card companies that default charges above £12 (around $29) would be presumed unfair.

The OFT is now investigating bank account charges and is expected to publish its findings later this year. The OFT has the power to make these investigations under the UK's Unfair Contract Terms laws. In Australia, similar legislation only exists in Victoria.

Consumer action groups in the UK say thousands of consumers have been successful in reclaiming penalty fees from banks.

The New Zealand Commerce Commission is also investigating the level of credit card late payment fees there. Under New Zealand law, these fees must be 'reasonable'.

Forever young

Are cosmeceuticals the way to youthful skin?

IN A NUTSHELL

- **So-called cosmeceuticals aren't quite the miracle products they're claimed to be.**
- **Prescription-only tretinoin and stronger AHAs are the best anti-aging treatments.**
- **Prevention is better than cure, and wearing sunscreen, sunglasses and a hat is the best prevention for some causes of aging.**

The current buzzword in the world of anti-aging is cosmeceuticals. Coined to describe products that are a cross between cosmetics and pharmaceuticals, the implication is they're better than cosmetics because they have a pharmaceutical (medical) effect. And there are plenty of 'sciency' references in their marketing literature to apparently back it up. But just how excited should we get?

Generally speaking, there are three forms of skin aging. First there's gravity, which results in drooping and folds around the eyes, jaw and neck. It's associated with the loss of skin elasticity and depleted subcutaneous fat. Surgical facelifts and fillers such as collagen or hyaluronic acid (brand names RESTYLANE and JUVEDERM) are used to reverse the effects.

Expression lines from smiling, squinting and frowning permanently etch themselves into your face over time. Botox injections can help prevent them by reducing your ability to make facial expressions, while collagen is used fill in some of the cracks.

Finally, there's photoaging, caused by UV damage, which affects the texture of the skin over time, making it rougher and causing fine lines, as well as pigmentation changes such as age spots and freckles. Prescription-only treatments include tretinoin (RETIN-A or RETRIEVE), with resurfacing by acid or laser available at the doctor's surgery.

Over-the-counter products with ingredients such as alpha hydroxy acids (AHAs), antioxidants (including vitamins A, B_3, B_5, C and E, green tea, soy isoflavones, grapeseed extract, Coenzyme Q10 and idebenone) and peptides may be of some help for photoaging, though it depends on their concentration, the preparation and your expectations. For example, vitamin C cream works well in concentrations of 10% or more, but it's difficult to stabilise it in creams and it can lose its effectiveness. For a closer look at the more recent products, see *New best friends?*, page 26.

In the recent past, most anti-aging creams claimed to treat only photoaging: to reduce the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles, to give skin a smoother appearance and reduce the appearance of freckles and blemishes. And to a greater or lesser extent, they did that.

But claims for some creams, in particular the cosmeceuticals, are venturing further into the facial cracks and crevices, claiming to act upon expression lines, and even gravity lines like jowls.

Dermatologists have expressed scepticism about whether they can work, pointing out that many of the claimed benefits are based on research on other parts of the body (such as the benefits of an antioxidant-rich diet on the cardiovascular system), and that cosmeceutical products are often tested only on cell cultures in test tubes. Common faults in clinical trials — that is, tests on real people — include using small numbers, not trying to conceal the product name, not using reliable techniques for measuring effects and/or being funded by the cosmetics companies themselves.

We're not convinced

You'll detect a reluctance on CHOICE's part to endorse most products. That's because we're not convinced they'll do you much good — especially considering the money involved. The findings of our counterparts overseas (see *How well do they* really *work?*, below, also left us less than enthusiastic.

There are several reasons why you may not get as much anti-wrinkle bang for your buck as you'd like from a cosmeceutical cream:

- There are many different factors involved in the skin aging process, including free radical damage, fat loss, changing hormonal levels, slower cell regeneration and deterioration of skin cell components such as hyaluronic acid, ceramides and polysaccharides. Using a cream that claims to act on only one or a few of these factors won't solve the whole problem.
- Everyone has different skin and different stressors acting on it to cause aging, so it's likely that any given product will work differently on different people.
- Pointing to scientific studies that 'prove' a particular ingredient works in test tubes doesn't mean the product as a whole will work when it's applied to your skin. There may be other ingredients that interfere with the action of the active ingredient, or the product may lack certain ingredients that would optimise the action of the active ingredient, or the active ingredient itself may not be stable in the product. More fundamentally, the active ingredient may not penetrate the outer layer of the skin at all.
- Many use only low concentrations of active ingredients, which makes it unlikely to have any benefit.

How well do they *really* work?

Last year our sister organisations in France and the US teamed up to test popular anti-aging creams and lotions. Eleven of them are available here in stores or online, so we're able to report on the results. (Note that we can't guarantee the formulations are identical to the products tested — some may have changed since the testing.)

Each cream was tested by between 17 and 23 women, aged 30–70. They were tested for 12 weeks, which the experts said was long enough for something to happen — if it was ever going to.

They found, in short, that all creams had some (positive) effect on some women (even the control moisturiser used), but no cream had an effect on all women. Any improvements were considered only 'slight', or as the French put it, *à peine visible* (barely visible). There was no relationship between the type of active ingredient and overall performance, nor did price relate to performance. They grouped the products into the following categories (in alphabetical order within groups):

Slightly more effective overall

- LANCÔME Paris Rénergie.
- OLAY Regenerist.
- ROC Retin-Ox+.

Average performance

- AVON Anew Alternative Intensive Age Treatment.
- L'ORÉAL PARIS Revitalift.
- L'ORÉAL PARIS Wrinkle Decrease with Boswelox.
- NEUTROGENA Visibly Firm with Active Copper.
- STRIVECTIN-SD Intensive Concentrate for Existing Stretch Marks.

Slightly less effective

- LA PRAIRIE Cellular.
- NIVEA Visage Q10 Plus.
- ROC Retinol Correxion Deep Wrinkle.

The LANCÔME and OLAY products were considered the best options for those willing to pay to give something a go — with the qualifier that you shouldn't expect any miracles. Some women found the ROC Retin-Ox+ too irritating on the skin, with redness and flaking reported. Its active ingredient is retinol, and in the stronger vitamin A products available with a prescription you can also get this reaction.

The bottom line

There are three good bets for anti-aging treatments:

- Tretinoin (also called retinoic acid), found in the prescription-only RETIN-A and RETRIEVE creams. Why? Find out under *New best friends?*, page 26.
- AHAs, but only in concentrations of 10% or more. Also see *New best friends?* for reasons.
- Sunscreen: the best antioxidant for skin, to slow down skin aging in the first place.

As for other products, a lot of them are very expensive and there's currently not much evidence in their favour. But they might smell and feel nice, moisturise your skin and make it look fresher. You might find some are better than others for you, and only you can decide whether it's worth the cost of experimenting with them. >

New best friends?

Neurotransmitter-inhibiting peptides: Botox in a jar?

It's quite common these days for anti-aging creams to self-compare with Botox injections, even claiming to work in a similar way to Botox — cashing in on the fact that we know Botox works. STRIVECTIN-SD is almost synonymous with its early advertising catch-phrase "Better than Botox?", while SKIN DOCTORS Relaxaderm is marketed as "the alternative" to injections.

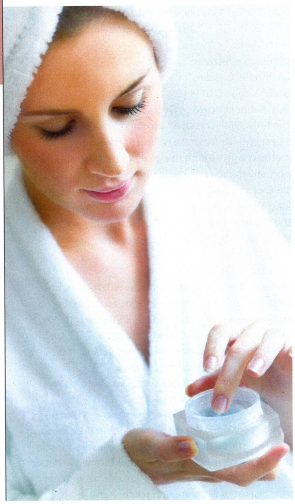
The question is, can you really get Botox in a jar?

Injections of Botox act locally by blocking the release of neurotransmitters that make your muscles do what they're told to do by your nervous system, effectively paralysing them. So, if you have injections between your eyebrows and your brain tells your eyebrows to 'frown', you can't actually frown.

Cream products making Botox-like claims contain certain peptides, which are protein substances made from small chains of amino acids. An example is acetyl-hexapeptide-3 (trade-named Argireline), which has been shown in a laboratory to inhibit the release of neurotransmitters. Products include SKIN DOCTORS Relaxaderm, ELIZABETH ARDEN Ceramide Plump Perfect Moisture Cream, PRINCIPAL SECRET Reclaim and DR LE WINN'S Line Smoothing Complex. (STRIVECTIN, just to confuse things, contains a peptide with a different action — see *Collagen-stimulating peptides*, below).

In concentrations of 5–10%, studies on Argireline have concluded it improves the appearance of wrinkles. Certainly the moisturising compounds in the products could give the impression of reduced lines and wrinkles by plumping up the skin with water. But to act like Botox, the peptides would have to penetrate the skin to the muscle level, and experts are sceptical about this.

Botox is targeted only at muscles involving expression lines; the creams are used all over the face. If they worked as claimed, muscles all over your face (and fingers, from applying the cream) would stop working. Which they don't.



Collagen-stimulating peptides

OLAY Regenerist and STRIVECTIN-SD contain palmitoyl-pentapeptide-3 (also known as Pal-KTTKS or Matrixyl). This pentapeptide has been found to stimulate the production of collagen and other proteins that are found in the extracellular matrix (the stuff surrounding and supporting cells) in the skin's dermal layer (the living part of the skin beneath the surface). If all goes according to plan, therefore, there should be a clinically significant improvement in skin.

Early ads for STRIVECTIN-SD asked whether it's "better than Botox". As it's recently hit the shelves in Australia, many Australian women may be wondering too. And since they're asking, someone carried out comparative testing of STRIVECTIN and Botox, to see which was better. And guess what: it wasn't STRIVECTIN. In fact it didn't do any better than the placebo control (a plain moisturiser with no active ingredients).

Unfortunately the only other clinical trials we could find were conducted by the manufacturer of the peptide complex. But see *How well do they really work?*, page 25, for real-life testing of OLAY Regenerist and STRIVECTIN-SD.

Copper-transporting peptides

Copper is an essential element for collagen and elastin formation, and a co-factor for creating a potent antioxidant in the skin. Peptides can be used to stabilise copper and theoretically take it to where it's needed in the skin, to improve the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles. NEUTROGENA Visibly Firm contains copper peptides but wasn't very successful in a real-life test (see *How well do they really work?*).

All the creams in the US/French test had some positive effect on some women, but no cream had an effect on all women. Any improvements were considered only slight ("barely visible"). There was no relationship between the type of active ingredient and overall performance, nor did price relate to performance.

Idebenone

The launch of ELIZABETH ARDEN Prevage earlier this year caused a minor media frenzy. It contains idebenone, a synthetic derivative of CoEnzyme Q10 (ubiquinone), said to be the most potent antioxidant available in the skincare industry today. Clinical trials of Prevage (used in conjunction with sunscreen) found some promising results in terms of reversing signs of photoaging, although they acknowledged that at least some of the effect could be attributed to the moisturiser base.

If that's not exciting enough, the trials tested the product in its finished form — that is, the product you buy is exactly the same as what was tested, unlike many other studies where the active ingredient is tested in some form or other but then used in different bases and at different concentrations when it hits the market.

At $200+ for 50 mL, it's certainly not cheap, and if you're game to try it at that price it'd be worth doing your own comparison test to check whether a moisturiser and/or a sunscreen was just as effective on your particular skin. But we'd like to see more and better research on this before people spend their money.

Tretinoin (retinoic acid)

Not so much a new best friend as a long-time friend, these vitamin A products are recommended by dermatologists. They work by stimulating collagen production, increasing blood flow and helping your skin shed old, dead skin cells (which makes it look smoother and fresher).

The prescription-only tretinoin products (RETIN-A or RETRIEVE) offer the best performance of all treatments you put directly onto your skin ('topical' treatments) at a much more reasonable price (around $40 or even less for a tube that will last four to six months). So if you're considering some sort of anti-aging treatment, talk to your doctor about whether it would be suitable.

Over-the-counter products containing retinol (another form of vitamin A) are less irritating to skin, though don't work as well. As always, concentration and formulation are the key to how effective a given product is. Compare the results, for instance, of ROC's Retin-Ox+ and Retinol Correxion Deep Wrinkle treatments in *How well do they really work?*. Neither works as well as tretinoin.

Alphahydroxy acids

Another old friend, AHAs are naturally occurring acids found in sugar (glycolic acid), milk (lactic acid) and fruit (such as citric acid). AHAs seem to do everything they claim to do: they stimulate collagen and hyaluronic acid production, slough away dead skin cells and clear pores. However, you need products with concentrations of 10% or more. Check the label for concentrations: most cosmetic products don't tell you how much is in them, which probably means not very much. ■

Something's rotten in the state of Australia's health — our teeth.

Nothing to smile about

IN A NUTSHELL

- **How much should it cost to visit the dentist? Are you paying too much? Check the table on page 29.**
- **Many people are avoiding preventative care and early treatment because they can't afford dental care, resulting in more serious oral and general health problems — with more extreme treatment and higher costs later on.**
- **The public dental health system is failing the people who need it most, with the Federal and state governments blaming each other for the crisis.**

Times were when people avoided going to the dentist for fear of physical pain. Now it's fear of financial pain that's putting people off.

A recent study of thousands of Australians representing all walks of life found that:

- 30% of adults reported avoiding dental care due to its cost.
- One quarter had untreated decay, and more than 20% had moderate to severe gum disease.
- Almost one in five had avoided certain foods because of problems with teeth, mouth or dentures.
- Just over half of Australian adults visited a dentist at least once a year.

So, the overall state of dental care in Australia isn't looking too flash. And it could get worse: it's been estimated that by 2010 Australia will have a shortage of 1500 dentists and other oral health professionals — equivalent to 3.8 million dental visits.

When the cost of a check-up, a couple of x-rays, a clean and scale and a fluoride application costs over $200 on average, perhaps it's little wonder people think twice about such preventative measures. And from there the costs blow out: throw in another $100+ for each filling needed, or $400+ for root canal treatment if it's gone that far, and you start to understand the current affordability crisis. We've tabulated the costs of some common dental procedures (see Table 1, right) to help you work out if you could get a better deal.

A significant minority of Australians are forced to go without regular dental care, perhaps requiring extractions or expensive remedial treatment some time down the track. At worst, people are being hospitalised with life-threatening illnesses. This shouldn't be happening in a wealthy country such as ours.

Who's to blame?

Responsibility for public dental healthcare has traditionally lain with the state and territory governments.

In 1994 the Keating government introduced the short-lived Commonwealth Dental Health Program, worth $100 million a year in its heyday (1995/96). This was additional to state funding. While the federal funding was less than a third of total public funding, it dramatically helped reduce waiting times for dental care, shifted treatment from extractions (a last resort) to fillings, and increased attendance.

The Howard government abolished the program at the end of 1996. The effects were immediate and >

Costs of some common dental procedures

As you can see from the table, there's a wide cost range for most item numbers. Charges vary for many reasons, including the surgery overheads, the expertise of the practitioner and the time it takes. Even a single item number can be charged differently by the same dentist: a filling on one surface may be particularly large or hard to access, for example, and require more time; or if you're having several fillings done at once there may be a discount (because it takes less time than doing each as a single filling).

The best way to avoid high dental charges is to look after your teeth: brush twice daily, floss, and go for regular check-ups.

What does a 'check-up and clean' cost?

If you add the price of a check-up (item 011 for a first visit, or 012 for a subsequent visit) and clean (114), you're looking at an average of $119.79 or $123.26. However, you're also likely to get a couple of x-rays (2 x 022 = $70.46) if you haven't had them in the last couple of years, and fluoride treatment (121 = $27.96), taking the total cost to around $220.

Looking for a better deal?

- If you're looking for a new dentist, ring ahead and get some prices for a check-up and clean. If the receptionist doesn't offer information about x-rays and fluoride, ask if they're included. How does that compare with the average $220?
- If you're concerned you've been quoted a high price for dental work, check the table to see where it lies in the range. You may find it's a fair price.
- If you have some expensive work that needs doing, it may pay to shop around. If you have a written quote with item numbers, ask the dentist (or receptionist) how much they'd charge for the same work. How does it compare with the average? Where does it lie in the range?

Table 1. Costs of some common dental procedures

Item number	Procedure	Average charge ($)	Range ($)
Diagnostic and preventative			
011	Comprehensive oral exam	45.39	31.00–70.00
012	Periodic oral exam	41.92	29.01–60.00
022	Single x-ray	35.23	25.00–47.69
111	Removal of plaque	43.51	25.00–70.00
114	Scale and clean	77.87	51.46–116.81
121	Fluoride	27.96	17.00–45.00
161	Fissure sealing (per tooth)	41.65	26.00–65.97
Surgical			
311	Extraction	112.01	70.00–182.97
Restorative (including fillings)			
531	Adhesive restoration — 1 surface, posterior	106.13	68.50–160.00
532	Adhesive restoration — 2 surfaces, posterior	136.42	90.00–202.50
533	Adhesive restoration — 3+ surfaces, posterior	164.00	105.00–252.87
577	Cusp capping, per cusp	27.19	15.05–49.76
Endodontic			
415 & 417	Root canal preparation and filling	394.46	222.80–598.89
Prosthodontic			
615	Full crown	1105.35	787.12–1600.00
(2x) 615 & 643	Bridge with 2 full crowns (veneered) and 1 pontic (replacement tooth)	3139.04	1949.24–4700.00
727 & (6x) 733	Partial maxillary (upper jaw) denture — cast metal framework with 6 teeth	1140.31	640.00–1952.50

USING THE TABLE

- The **average charge** is based on thousands of claims processed nationally in 2006 by not-for-profit insurer HCF, which compiles this data for its members.
- The **range** covers the middle 90% of claims, excluding extremely high (the most expensive 5% of cases) and extremely low (the cheapest 5% of cases) fees charged.

PHOTOS: ISTOCKPHOTO.IE

< devastating. Waiting lists and waiting times have blown out, there's been a shift to emergency dental care, such as extractions, and increased costs as dental problems get worse while waiting.

The Federal Government says dentistry falls under the jurisdiction of the states, and it's up to the states to pick up the funding shortfall. Only Queensland has done this. (Despite this, Queenslanders have the worst teeth in the nation — due to a lack of fluoridated water.) Others argue that because the mouth is part of the body, dental care is part of healthcare — a federal responsibility. And when poor oral health contributes to heart disease, premature births and severe problems leading to hospitalisation, it's difficult to argue for their segregation (see *Only connect*, below, for more).

Chloe's braces are covered

The Federal Government hasn't completely abandoned taxpayer funding for dental care, forking out hundreds of millions of dollars a year to people with private health insurance. The 30% tax rebate for people with ancillary cover was calculated at $438 million for the 2005/06 financial year for the dental care component of the extras cover rebate.

Having private dental cover does confer some benefit for teeth: people with dental cover are more likely to visit the dentist for a check-up (rather than a specific problem) and to visit the dentist at least once a year. Many companies actively promote preventative dental healthcare for members, with free or low-cost check-ups and cleaning — see Table 2, far right, for what the major insurers offer.

In terms of oral health, the study noted on page 28 showed people without dental cover had fewer teeth, a higher prevalence and severity of untreated crown and root decay, and higher prevalence of gum disease. However, differences may not be due only to having the cover — it might also be due to characteristics of the kind of people who take out such cover.

Approximately 42% of the population benefit from the private health insurance rebate, and while it's true people from all income groups have the insurance, it's very much the case that the more you earn, the more likely you are to have it. So it's the relatively wealthy who benefit most from this form of government dental funding. Consider also that a lot of private insurance dollars are spent on what's essentially cosmetic dentistry: for example, where healthy, functional teeth are straightened up with braces for a nicer smile.

Fed up to the back teeth

Meanwhile, back at the lower end of the income spectrum:

- Five million health concession cardholders are entitled to public dental care, many of whom have problems accessing services.
- At the moment there are 650,000 people on waiting lists for public dental care.
- The average waiting time for public dental care is 27 months.
- People on low incomes visit dentists less often than the more affluent, are more likely to have teeth extracted than filled, and are less likely to get preventative care.

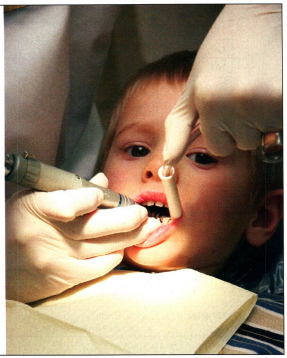
ONLY CONNECT

The mouth doesn't operate in isolation from the rest of the body, so it's no surprise the impact of poor oral health extends further.

There's increasing evidence of the links between poor oral health and cardiovascular disease, diabetes, poor nutrition (when you're limited to eating certain foods) and oral cancer. It's also connected with premature births.

Every year there are tens of thousands of hospital admissions for problems arising from a lack of preventative dental care. Sometimes it's because people require a general anaesthetic to have several teeth extracted. More alarmingly, there are many cases of life-threatening infections where a dental infection has spread to the eye or brain, or into the neck or chest cavity. Medicare foots the bill for this.

Finally there are psychological and social impacts resulting from appearance issues and problems speaking, such as loss of self-esteem, difficulties obtaining employment and becoming socially isolated.



People with particularly poor dental health and who are least likely to visit the dentist are low-income adults, people living in remote and rural communities, indigenous people, nursing home residents, people with disabilities, young adults on income support payments, and single-parent households.

The cost of dental care doesn't only affect the poor, though, with 23% of adults *not* eligible for public dental care reporting delaying or avoiding treatment because of the cost.

What's to be done?

A comprehensive National Oral Health Plan was endorsed by state and federal health ministers in July 2004. The plan acknowledged the disparity across socio-economic groups with respect to oral health, and sought to address this through equitable and efficient allocation of resources. But three years on, little progress has been made.

CHOICE is a member of the National Oral Health Alliance, an advocacy group comprising various community and welfare organisations, and dental and other health professionals. The Alliance has called on the Federal Government to renew its commitment to oral healthcare for disadvantaged adults by taking responsibility for covering the minimum costs of their basic dental care. The states and territories are also expected to uphold their responsibilities under the National Oral Health Plan, including oral health promotion, expansion of water fluoridation, and planning and development of high-quality and accessible adult oral health services.

Specific recommendations for Commonwealth action include:

- Funding preventative and early-intervention treatment for eligible adults: this entails a comprehensive oral health check (including clean, scale and x-rays) or the cost of a basic course of treatment (such as fillings or treatment for acute gum infection) every two years.
- Expanding eligibility for publicly funded dental healthcare to include those who aren't currently eligible, but who are unable to afford dental care.
- Ensuring the National Oral Health Plan is properly implemented.
- Funding the training of additional oral health professionals in universities.

Seeing the budget surplus of billions, members of the National Oral Health Alliance took their concerns to Canberra earlier this year, lobbying MPs and senators for increased expenditure on dental health. No funding was allocated in the latest budget to increase the affordability of preventative dental care for people on low incomes, although there was more funding for people with chronic conditions and complex care needs to receive dental care. There were also initiatives to increase dental training opportunities and clinical placements in rural and regional areas, and three scholarships per year to encourage indigenous people to work in dental health.

Private dental cover

If you have private health insurance with ancillary cover, chances are you can get free or low-cost preventative dental care — a great way to avoid high costs later on. But it won't help you if you don't use it. The recently published National Survey of Adult Oral Health found that almost 30% of people with private dental cover hadn't visited their dentist in the last year.

To get the most out of your health insurance dollar, take advantage of any dental healthcare provided by your insurance company. We've listed preventative procedures covered by major insurance companies in the table. If you're with a different company, ask what free or reduced-cost preventative dental care it funds. If it doesn't, consider moving your ancillary cover to a company that does.

Table 2. Preventative dental care offered by major health insurance companies

Company	Dental centre or participating dentists	Preventative incentives*
HBA	Over 1000 participating dentists	60–80% rebate, depending on the level of cover. Children covered by General or Premier Extras get no-gap cover for check-up, x-rays, clean and scale, and fluoride
HBF	Participating dentists (WA only)	No-gap clean and scale
HCF	Dental centres in Sydney + over 1500 participating dentists in Victoria, Queensland and regional NSW	No-gap check-up, x-rays, clean and scale, fluoride
MBF	Participating dentists	Receive at least 70–90% rebate, depending on level of cover
Medibank Private	Over 1600 participating dentists nationally	No-gap check-up, clean and scale, fluoride
NIB	Dental centres in Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong, plus 6 participating dentists in regional NSW	No-gap check-up, clean and scale, fluoride

* *'No gap' means there are no costs to you — the insurance company covers the whole amount.*

CHOICE's verdict

The cost of providing dental care (as outlined in *What's to be done?*, left) to those at the lower end of the income spectrum is high: starting at $160 million for the first year, rising to approximately $800 million per year after five years. That's about $280 per eligible person every two years.

But the costs of neglect are also high, not only in terms of quality of life for the individuals concerned, but also for a health system left to pick up the pieces when the problems become severe or even life-threatening.

People with private health insurance ancillary cover are already benefiting from government dental subsidies, and we'd like to see that largesse extended to all Australians, particularly those most in need. ■

There's more work to do, but baby foods have improved.

What's new, baby?

IN A NUTSHELL

- **The labelling's better and so are some of the products, but it's still true that not all baby foods are a good choice for every meal, every day.**
- **CHOICE wants all baby food manufacturers to label every ingredient in the food — they don't have to by law, but some do it already.**

CHOICE last reviewed Australian baby food in 2005 and we weren't happy with what we found: labelling that left far too many questions unanswered and lots of products that simply weren't the best choices for your baby. We're back to see what's changed and how you can buy the best baby food.

Labelling's looking up

There are improvements in labelling — the two biggest manufacturers, which bore the brunt of our criticism in 2005, took on board our message. Both HEINZ and GOLDEN CIRCLE have added to their ingredients labelling, giving more information than food laws require.

Both companies now tell you the percentage of vegetable, meat and fruit ingredients, even though by law they only need to declare them if they're in the recipe name or pictured. Additions like rice or polenta still often don't rate a percentage mention, but at least it's easier to see how much of the jar or can is given over to fruit, veg and meat and how much to cereals, thickeners or water.

Some companies, though, go further. MOTHERLY, BABY BOOST and ONLY ORGANIC tell you on all or most of their baby foods how much of every ingredient is in it. CHOICE wants all baby food manufacturers to do the same. Without comprehensive information on ingredients it becomes a matter of trust, and parents shouldn't have to rely on trust — they need solid information.

Some baby food issues still need improvement — see *Something sweet*, right, for the story on desserts and custards, for example.

Choosing baby food

- You can get simple single-ingredient products that are 100% fruit or veg. Don't just be guided by the name — compare this to the ingredients list. All the manufacturers make some products that are 100% fruit/veg/meat puréed (with a little water where necessary to thin thicker foods), but it's hard to know just by looking at the name.
- For more complex foods, check that the important ingredients are listed by percentage so you can see how much of the food is the ingredients you think you're paying for.
- Are thickeners and water being used? They're

sometimes needed to get the right consistency, but work out how much of the product is the food ingredients you want and how much is water and/or thickener. If it's rice pudding or vegies and rice you'd expect it to contain rice flour or ground rice, but otherwise, is it necessary?

- Additives in baby foods are restricted. Vitamin C is often added to make up for losses in processing, and it acts as an antioxidant to prevent fats going rancid and fruit and veg turning brown. But the regulations mean you won't find additives such as preservatives, colours and flavours in any foods for babies under 12 months, so don't be swayed by claims of no added artificial this or that.
- Concerned about sugar and salt? Check the ingredients list for added sugars and the nutrition panel for sodium content per 100 g, which should always be less than 100 mg. Some varieties manage much less.
- If you want an organic product, look carefully at whether all or only some ingredients are certified organic.
- Does your baby really need a special dessert? Dietitians have told CHOICE that babies don't. A 100% fruit purée, which you can use as is or mix with regular plain yoghurt or baby yoghurt from the chiller cabinet, is a better option than most baby custards or yoghurt-based desserts.
- How do you want to use the product? For storing under the stroller for a busy day out, a jar is convenient. But to replace a homemade dinner when your day is falling apart, a frozen or chilled baby food product that's less heat-treated may be a better choice.
- Food safety is especially important for babies. Processed baby food in unopened jars, cans or shelf-stable packs can be left unrefrigerated, but chilled or frozen baby foods need careful handling when you're out and about. In addition, make sure you refrigerate unused portions (following the pack instructions) and never reheat already heated or eaten-from foods. For home-prepared foods, the factsheet *Protecting tiny tummies*, available from the Food Safety Information Council's website (www.foodsafety.asn.au), offers good advice.

Something sweet

- **Baby custards** are little changed from those we looked at in 2005. The two biggest brands (HEINZ and GOLDEN CIRCLE) still make them with water as well as milk. At home you'd probably make custard just with milk rather than watering it down, plus some kind of thickener (usually cornflour).

Adding puréed fruit alone to sweeten would be a better choice than the sugar added to the HEINZ and GOLDEN CIRCLE custards. The pretty minimal: 1% or 2% in many cases, though a few have around 20%. ONLY ORGANIC makes its fruit custards with around 50% fruit.

There have been a few small changes. At least HEINZ has renamed its Banana Custard (1.5% banana) as 'Custard with Banana' and has also moved from skim milk to whole milk, although there's still more water than milk in many of its varieties.

GOLDEN CIRCLE no longer makes some of the desserts we criticised last time, such as egg custard. And it's changed the overall name of its dessert range to 'Little Extras', which at least emphasises that these foods shouldn't form the basis of a baby's everyday diet.

- Most **yoghurt-based and other desserts** aren't much better: often they're heavy on thickened fruit juice and light on things like puréed fruit and yoghurt. And babies don't need baby chocolate mousse or crème caramel. If you think your baby needs dessert, plain puréed fruit (all the manufacturers make some), plus some yoghurt if you like, is a more nutritious choice.

However, yoghurt's healthy image is mainly thanks to the possible benefits of live bacteria and its calcium content. But none of the yoghurt bacteria will live through the canning process into jars or cans of baby food.

- **Yoghurt** brands such as BABY YOPLAIT and VAALIA My First Yoghurt can be found in the chiller section of supermarkets and contain far more actual yoghurt than most of these other products in jars and cans. Regular yoghurt is also fine — look for the ones lowest in sugar. >

Making your own baby food

- Introducing solids gets your baby from breast milk or formula at about six months old to eating appropriate family foods by 12 months.
- Puréeing or mashing what the family is eating is the simplest solution, as long as your whole family has a healthy diet. But try not to mix too many flavours together at first — try single ingredients or simple combinations.
- Gradually moving to chunkier textures and finger foods is important. If you keep your baby on soft, smooth foods for too long, eating problems can develop.
- You don't need to add sugar or salt to your baby's food (manufacturers can't add salt to baby foods). Remove your baby's portion first if you salt the rest of the family's food and go easy on salty ingredients like cheese. Choose low-salt versions of creamed corn, baked beans and tuna.
- Follow safe food handling principles stringently — babies are particularly vulnerable to food poisoning.

Baby food brands: what you need to know

BABY BOOST

A chilled baby food with no thickening agents; most varieties have comprehensive labelling.

Labelling The label tells you the amounts of all the ingredients for all varieties, with two exceptions (Italian Lasagna and Tuna Casserole).

Thickeners/fillers BABY BOOST doesn't use any thickening agents. Cooking water, stock or juice is added to adjust the consistency when starchy vegetables (potato, sweet potato, corn) or pasta are included.

Product name accuracy Sometimes vegetables not mentioned in the name of the product are included — for example, BABY BOOST Pumpkin & Potato includes more sweet potato than potato.

Meat content Varieties with meat/fish have from 14% to 21%.

Type Plastic pouch, refrigerated.

Storage Must be kept refrigerated — can't travel or be stored at room temperature.

Processing The ingredients are prepared, cooked and mashed. The filled pouches are sealed, given a light pasteurisation treatment and chilled. This proprietary process gives a refrigerated shelf life of 90 days.

Price we paid

- 6 months+ savoury varieties, $1.59 per 120 g.
- 6 months+ sweet varieties, $4.39 per 4 x 125 g.
- 10 months+ savoury varieties, $1.99 per 170 g.

Website www.babyboost.com.au.

CHOICE's verdict A good choice overall for home use, but not ideal when you're out and about unless you take an insulated bag and freezer brick.

GOLDEN CIRCLE

Baby food in jars and cans. The labelling's improved since our last report.

Labelling Percentages of meat and vegetables in savoury and fruit in sweet varieties are generally given. The percentages of other ingredients such as polenta, ground rice, tomato paste, cheese and other minor ingredients aren't generally listed.

Thickeners/fillers Most varieties (other than simple/single-ingredient ones) include maize starch and many also ground rice as thickeners. Water is added to most varieties "as part of the cooking process and to produce appropriate consistency".

While many savoury varieties have a large proportion of vegetable/meat ingredients, some are lower: for example, GOLDEN CIRCLE 1st Foods Carrot, Potato & Beef contains only 34% of those named ingredients. See *Something sweet*, page 33, for information on sweet varieties.

Product name accuracy Varieties are usually clearly named, though some ingredients not in the name are sometimes included (such as polenta and ground rice).

Meat content Varieties with meat contain between 2.5% and 11% chicken/lamb/beef/tuna.

Type Jar/can.

Storage Can be stored at room temperature until opened.

Processing Prepared foods are heat-treated in jar/can to preserve them.

Price we paid

- 98 cents–$1.06 per 110 g jar.
- 75–89 cents per 120 g can.
- $1.09–$1.48 per 170 g jar.
- $1.09–$1.38 per 220 g can.

Website www.infant.goldencircle.com.au.

CHOICE's verdict It's easily transportable, but check the labels and choose well. There's room for improvement, particularly in the dessert/custard range.

HEINZ

A baby food brand with an extensive range of products in cans and jars. Its labelling has improved since we last looked at baby foods.

Labelling Percentages of main ingredients, such as vegetables, fruits and meat, are generally given on the label. The percentage of some ingredients is often not given, such as rice, polenta and other minor ingredients.

Thickeners/fillers Thickener (cornflour) is used in most varieties (other than single-ingredient/simple ones). Ground rice and polenta are also often included. All the same, most savoury varieties have a reasonable proportion of vegetable and meat ingredients. See *Something sweet* for information on sweet varieties.

Product name accuracy Most varieties are clearly named, though some include non-named ingredients. For example, HEINZ Mum's Recipe Chicken, Corn & Sweet Potato has more pumpkin than any other vegetable.

Meat content Most varieties containing meat are 10%–12% chicken/lamb/beef (only one has 5%), and 2.5%–8% fish.

Type Jar/can.
Storage Can be stored at room temperature until opened.
Processing Prepared foods are heat-treated in jar/can to preserve them.
Price we paid

- 89 cents–$1.28 per 110 g jar.
- 86–92 cents per 120 g can.
- $1.40–$1.57 per 170 g jar.
- $1.49–$1.60 per 220 g can.

Website www.heinzforbaby.com.au.
CHOICE's verdict It's easily transportable, but check the labels and choose well. There's room for improvement, particularly in the dessert/custard range.

HEINZ ORGANIC

Organic baby food in jars, with reasonably clear ingredient labelling on all varieties.
Labelling Percentages of main ingredients, such as vegetables, fruits and meat, are given on the label. Quantities for some ingredients aren't given, such as water and ground rice in several varieties.
Thickeners/fillers All varieties except four contain some thickening agent — maize starch/cornflour or ground rice. Water is added to most varieties "for cooking and to ensure appropriate texture". It's clear from the labelling that most varieties contain a high total percentage of fruits or vegetables and meat (where it's a meat variety). However, a few varieties are lower: for example, HEINZ Organic Chicken and Sweet Potato is 54% vegetables and chicken, with the remainder being water, thickener and parsley.
Product name accuracy Fruits or vegetables other than those named are sometimes included. For example, HEINZ Organic Chicken and Sweet Potato contains 29% sweet potato and 15% other vegetables; HEINZ Organic Pineapple Passion contains more apple (80%) than either pineapple or passionfruit (both of which are only present as juices). HEINZ says the products are named for the "characterising ingredients" that give the distinctive flavour.
Meat content Varieties containing meat are 10% chicken/lamb/beef.
Type Jar.
Storage Can be stored at room temperature until opened.
Processing Prepared foods are heat-treated in jar to preserve them.
Price we paid

- $1.29 per 110 g jar.
- $1.89 per 170 g jar.

Website: www.heinzforbaby.com.au.
CHOICE's verdict If you're after an organic baby food you can keep without refrigeration, it's a good choice in general.

MOTHERLY

Frozen baby food with clear labelling; contains no thickeners.
Labelling The amount of each ingredient is clearly given in the ingredients list.
Thickeners/fillers Cooking water and stock are sometimes included to thin starchy vegetables.
Product name accuracy Most varieties are accurately named. In some instances non-named vegetables are included (for example, MOTHERLY Green Bean Cubes include 22% potato).
Meat content Meat varieties are 31%–40% beef/chicken, although 40% varieties are being phased out.
Type Frozen cubes, frozen pots.
Storage Store in the freezer, heat cubes or a single pot from frozen.
Processing Cooked, filled into trays or pots, sealed. Preserved by freezing.
Price we paid

- $7.98 for 540 g pack (27 cubes).
- $3.49 for 180 g pack (9 cubes).
- $2.99 for 150 g pot.

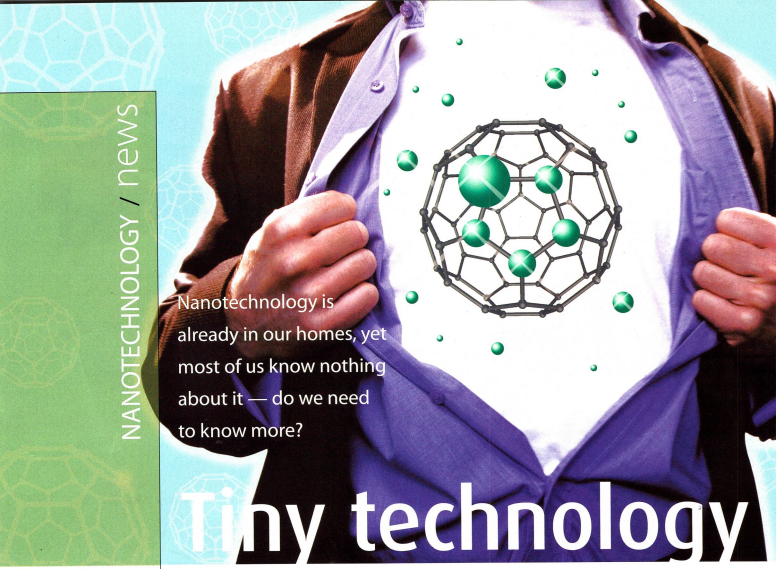
Website: www.motherly.com.au.
CHOICE's verdict A good, convenient choice for home that's been through minimal processing, but not easily portable.

ONLY ORGANIC

Shelf-stable organic baby food in jars or plastic pots. Most varieties are clearly labelled and contain no thickeners.
Labelling The amounts of major ingredients are given in most varieties, with the exception of desserts/custards, where only characterising ingredients are given (for example, the amount of banana in the banana custard, but not the amount of milk).
Thickeners/fillers ONLY ORGANIC claims "No thickening agents". While some varieties include water where starchy vegetables are included (such as potatoes or peas), others, often the desserts, include ground rice and water. Several dessert varieties, though, contain only puréed fruits.
Product name accuracy The names of the varieties are generally a good guide, with a few exceptions. For example, ONLY ORGANIC Banana Custard contains more apple than banana.
Meat content Meat varieties contain 9% beef or lamb.
Type Mostly jars; some varieties in plastic pots.
Storage Can be stored at room temperature until opened.
Processing Prepared foods are heat-treated in jar/pot to preserve them.
Price we paid

- $1.15 per 128 g jar.
- $1.75 per 200 g jar.
- $2.99 per 2 x 120 g pots.

Website www.onlyorganic.co.nz.
CHOICE's verdict If you're after organic, it's a good choice overall, and easy to take out and about. ■



Nanotechnology is already in our homes, yet most of us know nothing about it — do we need to know more?

Tiny technology

IN A NUTSHELL

- **From whitegoods to textiles, cosmetics to electronics, nanotechnology-based consumer products are everywhere around us, but you generally won't know as there's no national labelling requirement for them anywhere in the world.**
- **They've been allowed to flourish because of their potential benefits, but there are significant gaps in our knowledge about their potential side effects for health and the environment.**

Pants that don't wrinkle. Shirts that don't stain. Socks that fight fungal disease. Sheets that keep you cool and comfy. Transparent sunscreens that don't make you look like a ghost. Firmer yet lighter tennis racquets. Fast-drying boardshorts that protect you from sunburn. Long-lasting paints and grease-resistant coatings for buildings and furniture. Germ-fighting whitegoods claimed to keep your things fresher: your clothes in the wash, cups and plates in the dishwasher and food where it's stored, in the fridge or in plastic containers.

These are all products that use nanotechnology — they're in our homes already, without most of us realising it. They're just a few examples to illustrate the increasing presence of nanotechnology in consumer goods. Briefly, nanotechnology is the use of matter at the atomic or molecular scale — for more on the science behind it, see *What's nanotechnology?*, above right.

You've probably heard the above claims in ads, and of course there the news is all good, but most of us like to make our own judgments on new technologies coming into our homes. So what will nanotechnology mean to us when we're buying things?

From medicine to stain resistance

You might have already heard of nanotechnology applications in non-domestic situations, such as in the fields of environmental protection (for water and air purification, pollution detection and solar energy production) or in medicine. There it's already led to the development of more effective drug delivery systems, and it's hoped to lead to breakthroughs in cancer detection, diagnosis and treatment as well as enhanced tissue engineering procedures for nerve regeneration or replacement of body parts.

Nanomaterials are also commonly used in very thin coatings in the electronics industry, or in 'active' surfaces such as self-cleaning windows. They start creeping into household products when they're incorporated into products for surface sealing, cleaning and polishing, self-cleaning bathroom appliances, smaller and faster computers and fabrics for stain, wrinkle, odour or static resistance.

Fighting germs with nanosilver

Silver was already known for its natural antimicrobial properties, and nanosilver is widely used in a variety of products spanning whitegoods, textiles, kitchenware, pharmaceuticals and personal care items.

What's nanotechnology?

Nanotechnology is a generic term for a wide range of technologies derived from physics, chemistry and biology and used in medicine, consumer goods and other applications. It involves the engineering of materials at atomic or molecular levels — at the nanoscale — measuring up to 100 nanometres (nm) in diameter, to create new materials or materials with substantially different properties.

To give you an idea about the size we're talking about, one nanometre is a billionth of a metre (0.000001 mm); a human hair is about 80,000–100,000 nanometres wide. Without a microscope, we can't see anything smaller than about 10,000 nm.

Nanotechnology is sometimes called the 'new industrial revolution', or compared to information technology in the 1960s and biotechnology in the 1980s. It's certainly the buzzword in manufacturing, medicine and research. Nanomaterials aren't new, though. They occur naturally in sea spray or volcanic emissions, for example, or incidentally as by-products in diesel emissions or welding fumes. Some engineered nanomaterials have been around for a while, too, in chemical polymers, for example, or in computer manufacturing.

What's new now is that advanced tools are available that allow us to manipulate matter at the nanoscale, so we can expand and develop nanotechnologies in many different fields.

"Everything can be improved with nanotechnology, from healthcare to cleaner water and energy generation, and it's only a matter of time before much around us will incorporate the new technology," proclaimed Australia's Industry Minister last September.

Around 70 research groups, nearly 80 companies and several large corporations are working in the Australian nanotechnology industry, which is currently attracting investment of around $100 million each year for research and development.

Worldwide, the number of products sold under the nanotechnology banner is growing at an amazing speed. Three years ago, products incorporating nanotechnology represented just 0.1% of globally manufactured goods; by 2014 they're expected to increase to 15%.

By last November, eight months after the Washington-based Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars established a publicly accessible inventory of nanotech consumer products, the number of goods listed there had already increased by almost 70%. At the time of our research it had 475 consumer products listed, though it's estimated more than 700 are currently on the market.

Some fridges, dishwashers, air conditioners and vacuum cleaners have nanosilver particles embedded in surface coatings or filters to stop bacterial growth and prevent odours from forming. A Samsung washing machine CHOICE tested a few months ago is claimed to 'sanitise' the washing by discharging nanosized silver ions into the fabric during the 'silver wash' cycle. We asked then and would still like to know whether this technology is addressing a real problem — have you ever thought germs in your washing machine were a problem? — or is it just something new for marketing spin?

Nanosilver is also used in some cleaning products and air filters, teeth cleaners, toothpaste, nutrition supplements, condoms, wound dressings, dummies and other baby products.

Smart foods and packaging

Nanotechnology's in our food too, though it's difficult to get a clear picture of how widespread its use is in processed food production. While some estimate there might be more than 300 nanofood products on the market, the Woodrow Wilson nanotechnology products inventory (www.nanotechproject.org/44) had just three listed at the time of our research: canola oil (claimed to inhibit absorption of cholesterol in the bloodstream), chocolate 'slim shake' (claimed to carry nutrition to your cells) and nanotea (claimed to boost the adsorption and annihilation of viruses, free radicals, cholesterol and blood fat).

The other 60 products listed in the food and beverage category were either supplements such as colloidal silver, or for food storage or packaging, which is infused with antibacterial silver nanoparticles supposed to keep food fresh longer.

'Smart' or 'intelligent' packaging is a food-related area where nanotechnology applications are under investigation. Here nanosensors embedded into the packaging can help track a food from paddock to supermarket, or identify breaches in storage requirements, for example if the cooling chain has been interrupted or the use-by date exceeded. Many types of food packaging already contain nanoparticles to extend the product's shelf life.

Better UV protection

The nanotechnology revolution has also reached the cosmetics and personal care products market. Many broad-spectrum sunscreens nowadays no longer leave you looking like a ghost: they contain nanoparticles >

< of titanium dioxide and/or zinc oxide that make them more transparent. In fact, when the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) looked at the sunscreens on the market with these materials in January 2006, 70% of those with titanium dioxide and 30% of those with zinc oxide had it in nanoparticle form — altogether more than 300 sunscreens, which was about 25% of all the sunscreens available at the time.

Nano-oxides of iron, aluminium, zirconium, silicon and manganese have found their way into deodorant, soap, toothpaste, after-shave lotion, shampoo, conditioner, sunscreen, anti-wrinkle cream, moisturiser, foundation, face powder, lipstick, blush, eye shadow, nail polish and perfume. Friends of the Earth Australia (FoE) thinks several hundred cosmetics and personal care products with nanoparticles are currently on the market; on its website (http://nano.foe.org.au) it lists 116 that contain nanoparticles, based on information in the public domain.

But…

It's a CHOICE maxim that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. The problem with nanotechnology in consumer goods and the speed with which they're entering our homes is that it's all happened with comparatively little research (at least research that's publicly available) into the potential side effects of using nanoparticles, particularly on health and the environment. The technology may be as wonderful as it sounds and have no ill effects, but generally we like to know for sure first.

It's generally accepted that the characteristics of matter can be changed significantly at the nanoscale, and there are also concerns that the very properties of nanomaterials that make them so attractive — their small size and relatively larger surface area, which can make them more reactive — could also hold unforeseen health or environmental hazards.

Scientific studies suggest that some nanoparticles may cause harm to people and the environment, even if the material in its bulk form is non-toxic. Generally speaking, the smaller the particle, the more likely it is to cause a reaction.

Nanoparticles in consumer products may be present in clusters larger than 100 nm in size, in which case any toxic effects linked to their small size are no longer relevant. However, if they're present in fixed form — enmeshed in a solid matrix or liquid suspension — there's concern about how they behave in the environment during their disposal, destruction or recycling, when they may leach out of landfills, or how they affect workers during their manufacture.

Effects on human health

But it's free nanoparticles — those that aren't embedded in a substance but which make up the substance themselves, like in some cosmetics — that are of particular concern to human health, as they have the potential to enter the human body through the lungs, skin or intestinal tract. Once in the bloodstream, nanoparticles may be absorbed by organs and tissues. If they're absorbed, there's simply not enough data available on human exposure to nanoparticles to know how long they'll remain there, how much damage they may cause and at what dose.

The greatest risks may stem from inhalation of nanoparticles, as they can be deposited deep in the lungs where they may lead to lung disease and cancer. Whether and in what circumstances they can enter our bloodstream via the gastro-intestinal tract, or through the skin, is still unknown. However, it appears more likely that nanoparticles could penetrate broken skin that's damaged by the sun, eczma, acne or wounds.

Ecological risks

Nanoparticles could also have a significant ecological impact because of bioaccumulation — the increase in concentration of a pollutant from the environment into an organism through a food chain — especially if the nanoparticles absorb smaller pollutants such as pesticides, or if they persist in the environment because they're too small to detect.

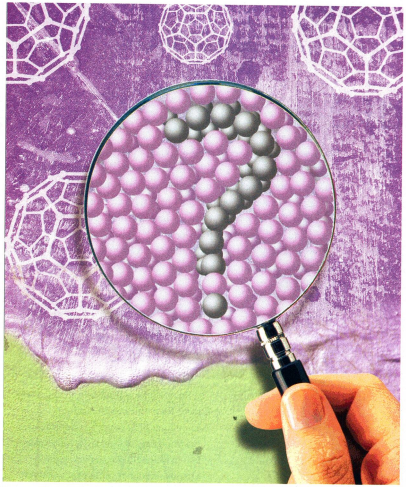
There may also be other problems. For example, as silver is a powerful bactericide, there's concern that in the environment, nanosilver particles could affect beneficial bacteria in the soil and water that are needed to help break down organic matter and keep waterways clean, or that they could lead to increased resistance to nanosilver among harmful bacteria.

We want to know

Consumer surveys in Europe and Australia have found that people generally know very little about nanotechnology. While we tend to appreciate its potential in medicine, we're less willing to buy nanotechnology products, especially if we have no way of telling whether we're doing so or not. And our biggest fears are of the unknown, as the effects of free nanoparticles in our bodies and the environment aren't yet fully known and understood.

Governments and regulators have to take these concerns seriously and work together with industry to ensure the health and safety of people and the environment. For us to trust the new technologies, transparency is of utmost importance.

We want to know what's happening in the marketplace. Manufacturers, however, are in a bind. On the one hand, they expect significant future returns from their heavy investments in nanotechnology, knowing very well that it can be the key point of differentiation from their competitors. On the other hand, they're reluctant to use the term — probably



because of mounting concern in the community — although public support will be critical for the commercial success of their products.

Those that choose to promote their use of nanotechnology tend to wax lyrical about the potential benefits — it'll improve our lives, make products cheaper and change the world for the better. But if we want to reap these benefits, we need to make sure any risks are kept to a minimum. In short, we need a rigorous testing regimen and regulatory controls.

Regulate or perish?

Calls for some sort of regulation of nanotechnology industries are mounting around the world. For example, one of the foremost scientific associations, the UK's Royal Society, and the Royal Academy of Engineering already warned as far back as 2004 that free nanoparticles should be treated as new chemicals and their release into the environment be avoided as far as possible until more is known about how they behave in the air, water and soil. It also recommended that ingredients in consumer products undergo a full safety assessment before they're permitted for use in products, and that manufacturers publish their methodologies publicly and identify the fact that manufactured nanoparticles have been added.

In the US, the Environment Protection Agency decided late last year that silver ion-generating washing machines must be registered as a pesticide, because the silver released into the wash is regarded as a pesticide. This means the onus is on manufacturers to prove their products won't harm the environment.

On the home front, FoE has been working on nanotechnology since 2005 in response to the rapid development of the nanotechnology industry with little or no critical debate or regulation. It's calling for a moratorium on the research, development and production of synthetic nanoproducts while regulations are developed to protect the health and safety of workers, the public and the environment.

The NSW Greens have joined FoE in their call for an immediate moratorium on nanotechnology products. And some academics are urging governments to strengthen our regulatory systems to ensure nanomaterials are evaluated for their safety and environmental impacts before they're released into the environment.

But so far there's been little public debate on the topic. The National Nanotechnology Strategy Taskforce released an options paper almost a year ago. It said there's an immediate need to fund and co-ordinate research into the risks arising from health, safety and environmental issues relating to nanotechnologies. It recommended, among other things, that a dedicated federal office be established, a regulatory framework investigated and public discussion initiated urgently.

While the Industry Minister announced a $21.5 million national nanotechnology strategy in his recent industry statement, few details had been made public when we went to press. So we hope it'll give due emphasis to assessing the impacts, addressing regulation and generating public discussion.

THEY CAN'T HAVE IT BOTH WAYS

Monash University ethicist Dr Rob Sparrow has pointed out the double-edged nature of the way the nanotechnology debate is being led. Advocates argue that it's 'revolutionary' when they want funding, he remarks, but that it's 'nothing new' if they want to diffuse fears, 'inevitable' if they want us to accept it and 'precarious' if they want more funding, laws changed or to drum up more enthusiasm among the public.

What you can do

Because there's no specific labelling requirement, we don't even know how many nanotech consumer products are already on the Australian market.

If you're concerned about the lack of transparency and regulatory control, write to manufacturers asking them to ensure their products containing nanoparticles are safe and clearly labelled. And write to your local MP and the Hon. Ian Macfarlane, MP, Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources, asking them to:

- Make labelling mandatory for all products containing nanoparticles.
- Put research into the risk factors of nanotechnologies before product research, and
- To engage the public in the debate. ■

The big picture

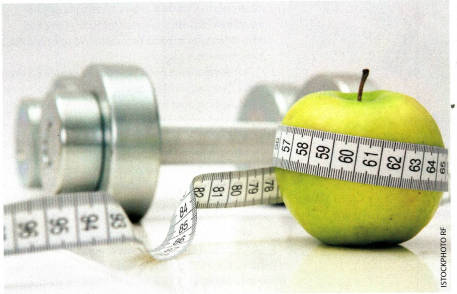
If the Australian Labor Party wins the next federal election, it plans to introduce a Healthy Kids Checks program, which could include measuring BMI (body mass index) and height for all children when they start school. This type of monitoring is already happening in UK primary schools in an effort to track the growing obesity epidemic. But some experts think obesity screening is hard to justify.

First, if we don't yet have an effective weight reduction strategy to offer, what's the point in identifying individual children at risk, some people ask.

Second, there are concerns that labelling individual children as overweight or obese could cause emotional or psychological harm.

The Commonwealth Government's latest budget includes measures to tackle obesity, including grants for community physical activity programs, funding for a national nutrition and physical activity survey, and a new *Wellbeing Plan for Children*, which will help parents to promote healthy eating and physical activity to children.

Is this enough? And what do you think of Labor's plan? To have your say, post a blog comment on our new website at www.choicefoodforkids.com.au/blog.aspx



Exercise — the smart choice

We all know exercise is good for us, but most of us still need a fair bit of motivation to do it. Here are two things about exercise you might not know, from the June issue of CHOICE *Health Reader*.

- Familiar with the expression 'use it or lose it'? Early research from the US has shown exercise can specifically target a region of the brain known to be affected by age-related memory decline, by improving blood flow in the area and increasing new cell growth. Now all you need to do is remember where you put your gym gear…
- Participating in sports like gymnastics, lightweight rowing and ballet — where there's emphasis on maintaining a certain body weight — can lead to unhealthy weight-control behaviour in teenagers, particularly males. A US study found that teenage boys participating in weight-related sports were three to six times more likely to engage in vomiting, laxative use, diuretic use and even steroid use than those who didn't take part in these types of sports.

If you'd like to subscribe to CHOICE *Health Reader*, call 1800 069 552 toll-free, or go to choice.com.au/magazines.

BLAME IT ON FOOD CRAVINGS?

Experts are suggesting women of childbearing age should be an important focus for public health nutrition campaigns after research undertaken at the University of Newcastle found that falling pregnant doesn't appear to provide enough incentive for women to improve their diet.

According to the researchers, the diet quality of Australian women in general is quite low, and there's little difference in dietary quality between pregnant women and those who aren't, which they found surprising.

They compiled food frequency questionnaires from over 9000 women aged 25–30, drawn from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health. They then calculated each woman's Australian Recommended Food Score (ARFS) — a newly developed diet quality score and research tool that reflects adherence to national dietary guidelines. The optimal ARFS for women who are pregnant is 72 (or 74 if not, after you add two points for benefits gained from a moderate intake of alcohol), but the average among the women studied was 28.4, and among those who were pregnant it was 29.5, which isn't significantly different in 'real food' terms.

Ribena caught out

You probably heard recently on TV that the maker of RIBENA, the drink of choice for children for generations, was exposed for making incorrect claims about the amount of Vitamin C it contains.

GlaxoSmithKline has admitted to claiming that RIBENA Ready-to-drink contained a certain amount of vitamin C when in fact it contained significantly less, and falsely implying that RIBENA contained four times the vitamin C of orange juice, which it didn't.

While the company's been running ads apologising for the error, they've also included a plug for RIBENA Syrup, still described as a 'rich' source of vitamin C.

Regardless of the hoo-ha surrounding the false claims, the facts are:

- The main ingredients of the ready-to-drink product are water and sugar, and blackcurrant juice makes up just 5.8%.
- The main ingredient of the syrup is sugar — once reconstituted, the syrup drink has more sugar than COKE.

So either way it's a whole lot of sugar and empty kilojoules.

As for vitamin C, a deficiency of it is a very uncommon problem for Australian children, and they can get all they need from fruit and veg. False claims aside, RIBENA isn't and never has been a great choice of drink for kids.

For more nutrition information on kids' foods, including RIBENA, go to www.choicefoodforkids.com.au.

DO YOU HAVE AN ALLERGY?

If you've got a food allergy, scrutinising ingredients lists is second nature, but knowing what to look for isn't always as obvious as you'd think. Many food allergens lurk under ingredients with unexpected names. Milk protein, for example, can be listed as casein, or soy as hydrolysed plant protein.

To try and make life simpler, Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) has released wallet-sized allergen cards, which list the potential problem ingredients for those with allergies to soy, milk, egg, wheat, peanuts, sesame, tree nuts, fish and shellfish.

To order copies of the cards, email Anaphylaxis Australia at coordinator@allergyfacts.org.au or FSANZ at info@foodstandards.gov.au, or you can download copies at www.foodstandards.gov.au/newsroom/publications/allergencards.cfm.

ConFUZEd?

No added sugar, 99% juice, natural colours, natural flavours, vitamin C, low GI … With all that going for it FUZE Cola would really have to be "a soft drink that not only tastes good but is good for you". Would you be doing yourself a favour to drink it instead of ordinary cola?

In fact FUZE Cola is marginally more fattening (has more kilojoules per serve) than regular COKE. The sugar in FUZE is from apple juice (mostly fructose) whereas COKE is sweetened with ordinary table sugar (sucrose), but sugar is sugar and they're both just as bad for your teeth.

The acidity of these drinks is also bad for your teeth — it causes erosion of the tooth enamel. FUZE Cola is even more acidic that COKE (it has a lower pH), with its higher concentration of enamel-destroying phosphoric acid.

You might get a little vitamin C from the apple juice in the FUZE Cola, but if you're concerned about your teeth or putting on weight, drink water instead and eat an apple. It's got fewer kilojoules than a serve of one of these soft drinks and is likely to leave you feeling more satisfied. Studies have shown fresh fruit doesn't cause tooth decay as much as juices and soft drinks despite its sugar content, and it also gives you other nutrients you won't get from fruit juices and drinks.

Product	Nutrients per 200 g serve				
Drink (in order of kJ per serve)	**Energy (kJ)**	**Sugars (g)**	**Phosphoric acid (mg)**	**Vitamin C (mg)**	**pH**
Coca-Cola	360	21.2	140	3.0	2.43
Just Juice Apple Juice (A)	360	20.6	2	45.8	3.69
Fuze Cola with Apple Base	374	22.0	190	3.2	2.35

(A) Juice included for comparison with soft drinks.

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

The daily grind

If you make real coffee at home, choosing a coffee grinder is as important as choosing the right coffee machine. Coffee perishes quickly and ground coffee can lose flavour fast. If you're serious about great-tasting coffee you'll want to freshly grind your beans just before you use them.

Choosing a grinder

Pre-ground coffee is also likely not to be the right grind for your machine. The labels on some pre-ground coffee packets say the grind is suitable for a plunger, percolator and a home espresso machine, which just doesn't work. Coarse grinds suit percolators, medium grinds are good for plungers, fine is for filter and espresso machines, while extra-fine is needed for Turkish coffee.

A burr grinder is the most suitable type for most home espresso machines — it produces a more uniform and fairly fine grind. The alternative, a blade grinder, chops up the beans to different sizes — how long you keep your finger on the button determines the fineness of the grind, and it's easy to turn the coffee into something resembling flour, which could block the filter and even damage the pump in espresso machines.

Even with a burr grinder, you'll almost certainly need to play >

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Your coffee will taste better if you freshly grind the beans immediately before making it.**
- **You need a burr grinder to get the right grind for a home espresso machine.**

PRODUCT
Brand / model (in rank order)
Delonghi KG100
Starbucks Burr Grinder EL60
Sunbeam Conical Burr Grinder EM0450
Kitchen Aid Artisan Burr Grinder 5KCG100
Breville BarAroma Coffee & Spice Grinder BCG450
Krups GVX2A2
Saeco MC 2002 / MAC001
Rancilio Rocky No Doser
Gaggia MM 0400
Bodum Antigua Burr Coffee Grinder 10539
Delonghi KG59
Sunbeam Burr Grinder EM0430
Breville CG12 Café Roma Coffee Mill

what to buy

DELONGHI KG100
Price $169
STARBUCKS Burr Grinder EL60
Price $185
These two models seem to be identical.
Good points

- Grinds finely enough for domestic espresso machines.
- Among the quietest.
- Very easy to empty the container for the ground coffee.
- Timer switches off the grinding action.
- Easy to clean the removable hopper and coffee container.
- Very easy to adjust the fineness control.

Bad points

- Nothing in particular.

SUNBEAM Conical Burr Grinder EM0450
Price $159
Good points

- Grinds finely enough for domestic espresso machines.
- Very easy to empty the container for the ground coffee.
- Can grind directly into the filter basket using the grind-on-demand switch.
- Easy to clean the removable hopper and coffee container.
- The bean hopper has a self-closing device at the bottom, so when the hopper's removed, no beans fall out.

Bad points

- No automatic switch-off.

PERFORMANCE					FEATURES			SPECIFICATIONS	
Overall score (%)	Fineness of grind score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Time to grind 30 g coffee (sec)	Noise (dB)	Fineness settings	Automatic switch-off	Removable hopper	Contact	Price ($)
92	90	93	44	74	16	✓	✓	www.delonghi.com.au	169
92	90	93	46	74	16	✓	✓	www.starbucks.com.au	185
90	90	90	40	78	25		✓	www.sunbeam.com.au	159
89	90	88	20	73	15		✓	www.petermcinnes.com.au	379
87	90	83	34	73	33	✓	✓	www.breville.com.au	170
83	90	75	38	77	17	✓		www.krups.com	149
82	90	73	50	77	35			www.saeco.com.au	229
74	90	58	30	75	50			www.mocopan.com.au	405
73	90	55	40	81	9			www.gaggia.net.au	149
68	50	85	32	76	12	✓		www.bodum.com.au	189
64	40	88	58	82	8	✓	✓	www.delonghi.com.au	99
54	40	68	22	79	17	✓		www.sunbeam.com.au	79
43	20	65	23	77	17	✓		www.breville.com.au	70

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Fineness of grind: 50%
- Ease of use: 50%

Ease of use is made up of the following, weighted equally:

- Operating the grinder.
- Timing control.
- Cleaning.
- Adjusting fineness control.

Price Recommended retail as of April 2007.

KITCHEN AID Artisan Burr Grinder 5KCG100

Price $379

Good points

- Grinds finely enough for domestic espresso machines.
- The fastest to grind 30 g coffee.
- Among the quietest.
- Very easy to clean the removable hopper and coffee container.
- Very easy to adjust the fineness control.

Bad points

- No automatic-switch-off.
- Comparatively expensive.

BREVILLE Bar Aroma Coffee & Spice Grinder BCG450

Price: $170

Good points

- Grinds finely enough for domestic espresso machines.
- Among the quietest.
- Timer switches off the grinding action.
- Easy to clean the removable hopper and coffee container.
- Very easy to adjust the fineness control.

Bad points

- Nothing in particular.

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

about the rest

- The KRUPS and SAECO grind coffee as finely as the models in the *What to buy* list, but aren't quite as easy to use. The KRUPS is much the cheaper of the two ($149) and could be a bargain if you found it for even less.
- The RANCILIO grinds well, but scored second lowest for ease of use and cleaning because it doesn't come with a container for the ground coffee. The locking mechanism on the adjusting ring is also fiddly to get onto the chosen setting.
- The GAGGIA scored the lowest for ease of use — small coffee particles fly out and make a mess when the container is emptied. The GAGGIA hopper is also stiffer to rotate than the other models on test.
- The BODUM, DELONGHI KG59, SUNBEAM EM0430 and the BREVILLE Café Roma don't grind finely enough for domestic espresso machines — even their finest grind is still too coarse. This makes the coffee weak in flavour, without much of a quality crema on top. This BREVILLE's hopper lid also lifts off when there's only a small amount of beans left in it, and coffee particles fly out.

You'll almost certainly need to play around with the grind settings to suit your particular espresso machine. If it's too coarse you'll get poor flavour and crema, too fine and it can block the filter.

< around with the grind settings to suit your particular machine. If it's too coarse you'll get poor flavour and crema, too fine and it can block the filter. As a general rule your coffee should flow out of the espresso machine and fill a cup in about 25 seconds. If it's quicker the coffee is too coarse, and if the grind is too fine it'll be slower. And if you change coffee brand or type you may need to adjust your grinder to suit.

You can make life easier by choosing a grinder with a timer that switches it off after a preset time — the table on page 43 lists which models have one. And a removable hopper (the bean container) makes it easier to clean.

Choosing the right coffee

- Try out different brands and roasts to see which you like best. CHOICE's in-house tester/barista swears by beans roasted by small local roasters, as he finds them fresher than those available prepacked from major brands in supermarkets.
- If you're feeling really adventurous you can buy green beans and roast them yourself — some people use a popcorn popper. ■

HOW WE TESTED

- Our tester/barista adjusted the grinders to produce a grind fine enough for the BREVILLE Café Roma espresso machine, which is the CHOICE lab's reference machine. He used the same setting to grind coffee for the SUNBEAM Café Latte EM5600, which rated equal best in our last espresso machine test. Both are machines intended for home, not commercial, use. He made two cups of espresso using VITTORIA Oro beans and judged the crema quality and the strength of the coffee.
- He also looked at how easy the grinders are to clean, how easy to the controls are to adjust and the fineness of the grind.

Coffee saviour?

The VACU VIN Coffee Saver, similar to the VACU VIN wine preserver, uses a pump to remove air from the container, creating a partial vacuum so "the flavour and aroma of the coffee will be kept in perfect condition". The Coffee Saver holds 250 g of ground coffee, enough for around 30–35 cups of espresso, and costs around $35.

The distributor told us several coffee suppliers use and recommend it, but after two weeks of comparison taste-testing, our inhouse coffee connoisseurs found no difference between the taste of the ground coffee stored in the VACU VIN and coffee stored in a screwtop container — and in their opinion, freshly ground coffee won hands down over both anyway.

If you need to store ground coffee for longer — which isn't recommended from a flavour point of view — the VACU VIN might be worthwhile (we only tested it for two weeks), but it'd be cheaper to use a screwtop container. If you buy a large quantity of coffee, to prevent oxidisation from frequent opening of the container it's a good idea to divide the amount between smaller containers.

TESTER'S TIPS: STORING AND CLEANING

- **The jury is still out on the best way to store your beans: some industry experts recommend storing them in the freezer; some say the fridge is better, while others think storing coffee in an airtight container in a cool, dark place works just fine. Just don't store coffee where air and light can get to it. See *Coffee saviour*, left, for CHOICE's verdict on a vacuum container designed to store ground coffee.**
- **Clean the hopper and the ground coffee container regularly; coffee's an oily substance and can go rancid after a while.**

Only three TVs in our test have a built-in digital tuner.

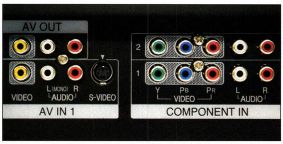
Where's the tuner?

They're impressively stylish and deliver a high-quality 'at the movies' viewing experience to your living room (but with cheaper popcorn), so it's little wonder large flat-screen televisions are steadily growing in popularity — and thankfully, decreasing in price too.

In this test we assessed 12 large flat-screen televisions, ranging in size from 101–107 cm and in a price range of $1399 to $2999. Rather than single out one particular type, we've combined plasma, LCD and rear projection TVs. There's no longer much difference in price between the different technologies, and as you can see from the results, performance isn't tied to technology either.

The two top models, the LG and the REGAL, both have good overall scores of 75% and 74% respectively. While the REGAL was let down in the sound department with a score of just 51% (which won't bother you if you have the TV hooked up to your hifi sound system), its picture quality is among the >

Which connections?	In	Out
TV antenna cable	All	None
Composite video	All	All except Acer, Benq and Regal
S-video	All	None
Component video	All	None
RGB	Sanyo	None
Stereo audio	All	All except Acer and Benq
Digital audio	Not applicable	LG and Regal
Headphones	Not applicable	Hitachi, Sanyo, both Sonys, Toshiba and Viewsonic
DVI	TCL	None
HDMI	All except TCL	None
PC VGA input	All except Hitachi	Not applicable



For an explanation of the various connections, see CHOICE, November 2006, page 25.

HOW WE TESTED

- To check the picture and the colours our testers set up all 12 TVs close together and adjusted their controls to get the best picture quality possible. They kept the lighting in the room low and the sound muted, and four experts watched a variety of footage (from various movies and live TV) simultaneously on all the tested screens. They evaluated the picture quality and rated it out of 10.
- Testers checked how well each TV produces accurate colour, using a specially calibrated high-quality monitor as a reference.
- They displayed a number of test patterns from a high-quality DVD player, to measure if any picture was being cut off at the edges and/or any apparent distortions (such as circles that aren't round, or wavy lines that should be straight).
- They played movies and other footage to check the screen's ability to produce images without colour banding, jerkiness, blurring, vibration and colour bleeding in high-contrast or very intensely saturated parts of the image. They also checked that there were no trails behind fast-moving objects on the screen.
- They measured each TV's sound to see if there were any obvious gaps in its ability to produce sounds in the audible range, and listened to both movies and music to check for rattles, hums, hisses or distortion, as well as making a judgment on how well the high and low sounds were produced.
- To see how easy the TVs are to operate, testers used the remote control, front panel controls and onscreen display to perform a number of common tasks. They looked for clear labelling, buttons and controls that are easily identified and can be used without interfering with other controls, and logical menus. Whether the TV had an inbuilt digital tuner was also included in the ease of use score.
- Finally they used a power meter to measure the power the TV uses on standby.

WHAT TO BUY

LG 42PC1DG-AA	$2499
REGAL Avera RL-42XHD	$2499

IN A NUTSHELL

- **LCD, plasma and rear projection TV — you won't find much of a difference between them these days**
- **We've started marking down models that don't have a built-in digital tuner**

A fast-talking salesman might try to persuade you that one technology blows the other out of the water, but don't be fooled — our tests found plasma and LCD televisions spread from top to bottom of the ratings.

< best we've seen. So not all TVs from a small brand are destined to be duds.

Time they all had a digital tuner

Nine of the 12 tested TVs don't have an integrated digital tuner, which CHOICE thinks is now unacceptable with the end to analogue broadcasting just around the corner. It's high time all manufacturers started including one — whether it's standard-definition (SD) or high-definition (HD) — in their televisions, and we've started penalising them if they don't. In our new scoring method, 25% of the ease of use score is devoted to the inclusion of an integrated digital tuner.

For the consumer, having to buy a separate set-top box (which acts as a tuner) to receive digital TV is yet another addition to the cost of purchasing a television, and also adds the inconvenience of an additional remote control, another menu system to learn and more clutter in the lounge room.

For most people, it won't matter whether the tuner is HD or SD at the moment, as currently there's not a lot of HDTV being broadcast (each broadcaster is only required to show around 20 hours a week of HD programming). But there will be more in the future, so an HD tuner will give you better long-term options. In our test, the LG, REGAL and HITACHI all have an integrated HD digital tuner.

The technologies

A fast-talking salesman may try to persuade you that one technology blows the other out of the water, but don't be fooled — our tests found plasma and LCD televisions spread from top to bottom of the ratings. The only LCD rear projection RV, the SONY Bravia KF-42E200A, sat in the middle, but was the cheapest TV tested.

Rear projection televisions (RPTVs), so-called because the television's image is projected and reflected onto the screen from inside the television, seem to have been overshadowed by flat-screen plasma and LCD TVs in recent times, but with their lower prices and high-quality images they're still attractive for the consumer.

If you're thinking of buying an RPTV, however, take the layout of your living area into consideration — is your couch directly in front of the TV? We found that when viewed from the sides, the SONY Bravia KF had noticeable picture degradation, but was fine when viewed from front on. This television is also considerably thicker than its flat-panel counterparts and couldn't be wall-mounted.

If you want to hang your TV on a wall, an LCD TV is a good choice as plasma models are heavier and generally need professional mounting. When not wall-mounted, TVs need to be placed on a stable surface so they can't topple over. This is particularly important if you've got an active toddler on the loose. ■

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

For points to consider when buying a TV, see the LCD TV report in CHOICE, April 2007, or go to choiceextra.com.au and click on that issue under 'Television, 81 cm' in the index.

USING THE TABLE

Tuner type A = analogue, HD = high-definition digital.
Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Picture quality: 50%
- Sound quality: 20%
- Ease of use: 20%
- Energy consumption on standby: 10%

Claimed resolution All screens are high-resolution except the NEC, SANYO, TCL and TOSHIBA

* *Includes base and protrusions.*
(A) Available in some Harvey Norman stores, but can be ordered through any.
(B) Discontinued but may still be available in some stores.

PRODUCT			PERFORMANCE					SPECIFICATIONS	
Brand / model (in rank order)	Type	Tuner type	Overall score (%)	Picture quality score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Standby energy score (%)	Screen size (cm)	Claimed resolution (pixels)
LG 42PC1DG-AA	Plasma	A, HD	75	77	63	74	90	106	1024 x 768
Regal Avera RL-42XHD (A)	LCD	A, HD	74	81	51	71	90	107	1366 x 768
Hitachi 42PD900DTA	Plasma	A, HD	72	68	75	69	90	106	1024 x 1080
Sony Bravia KLV-40S200A (B)	LCD	A	68	72	63	46	100	102	1366 x 768
Toshiba 42WP56A (B)	Plasma	A	68	72	64	50	90	106	852 x 480
Sony Bravia KF-42E200A (B)	LCD rear projection	A	64	64	67	44	100	105	1280 x 720
Benq V42P VA421 (B)	LCD	A	63	69	61	44	70	107	1366 x 768
NEC PXT-42SV2	Plasma	A	63	69	61	43	80	106	852 X 480
Acer AT4220B	LCD	A	62	69	54	46	70	107	1366 x 768
Sanyo PDP-42XS1	Plasma	A	61	66	53	42	90	106	852 X 480
TCL PDP4221A (B)	Plasma	A	61	57	77	41	90	106	852 x 480
Viewsonic N4060W	LCD	A	55	58	43	40	90	101	1366 x 768

profiles

The models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order.

LG 42PC1DG-AA

Price $2499

Good points

- Good picture quality.
- Easy to use the remote control and onscreen menus.
- Has a built-in high-definition digital tuner.
- Excellent standby energy score.
- The remote can control other video devices, even from other brands.

Bad points

- Poor level of detail in dark scenes.
- Onboard controls are very small.

REGAL Avera RL-42XHD

Price $2499

Good points

- The best picture quality — crisp and clear.
- Easy-to-use onscreen menus.
- Has a built-in high-definition digital tuner.
- Excellent standby energy score.

Bad points

- Scored only 51% for sound, which won't be a problem if you connect the TV up to your sound system.
- No AV inputs accessible from the front.

Dimensions (H x W x D, cm)*	Contact	Price ($)
5 x 113 x 38	1800 725 375, www.lge.com.au	2499
0.5 x 107 x 31	02 9756 0030, www.skywave.com.au	2499
1.5 x 113.5 x 36.5	1300 726 642, www.hitachi.com.au	2999
2 x 99 x 33.5	1300 137 669, www.sony.com.au	2699
8 x 110 x 39	1800 505 051, www.castel.com.au	1499
2.5 x 100 x 36	1300 137 669, www.sony.com.au	1399
9.5 x 107.5 x 31.5	02 9714 6800, www.benq.com.au	2291
3.5 x 124.5 x 27	131 632, www.nec.com.au	1999
9.5 x 107.5 x 31.5	1300 366 567, www.acer.com.au	2799
3.5 x 125 x 30.5	1800 677 676, www.sanyo.com.au	1999
7.5 x 123 x 28	03 9681 8893, www.tclelectronics.com.au	1699
5.5 x 101.5 x 28	1800 032 689, www.viewsonic.com.au	2099

about the rest

- The HITACHI scored second highest for sound quality and also has an inbuilt high-definition tuner, but we didn't include it in the *What to Buy* list because its picture quality isn't quite up to scratch — it's slightly off-tone. It's also quite expensive.

The rest of the models don't have a built-in digital tuner and so lost marks for ease of use, but the following factors are also worth noting:

- The SONY Bravia KLV and the TOSHIBA both have good picture quality scores, and the TOSHIBA in particular could be attractive at only $1499, if you can find it still available in shops.
- The rear-projection SONY Bravia KF has a faint hissing sound coming from the air vent at the rear. There's very noticeable picture degradation when viewed from the sides, above and below, and it's thicker than most plasma and LCD models. However, it's also cheaper.
- The BENQ, NEC, ACER and SANYO all have fairly average picture and sound quality.
- The TCL and VIEWSONIC scored just 57% and 58% respectively for picture quality. The TCL has good sound quality, though.

Cordless freedom

Remember the days when the home telephone had its own table and seat? Now cordless phones complement an increasingly busy lifestyle, allowing you to move through the house and garden while talking to family and friends.

Cordless phones also now provide many features that mobile phone users take for granted, such as a phone book, caller ID and polyphonic ringtones. And they're not expensive with it — the top four models in this test cost less than $100, some much less.

However, not all mobile phone features are finding favour among cordless phone users. SMS, so popular with mobile users, seems to be a feature cordless phone users are happy to do without, according to sources in the industry. However, this might simply be a reflection of the lack of widespread SMS support across the landline networks, which means your cordless phone may not be able to use an SMS facility even if it has it.

Digital differences

The move from analogue to digital is all but complete, with the choices now more a matter of what style, features and digital signal will work best in your home.

Phones marked as DECT run on the 1.8–1.9 GHz frequency, which no other appliances use, so this might be what to look for if your home is full of wireless gadgets. Only three of the 17 models in this test

IN A NUTSHELL

- **While most of the 17 cordless phones work well, there are differences in reception range, ease of use and recharge times to consider when purchasing.**
- **Some of these phones won't support extra handsets, so think about what you might want in the future.**

what to buy

UNIDEN DSS 3415

Price $99

Good points

- Enough reception coverage both outside and inside to satisfy most housing situations.
- Hearing aid compatible and has a headset connection, which makes it a good option for anyone hard of hearing.
- Very easy to use, with an excellent, user-friendly instruction manual.

Bad points

- Not GAP compatible (it won't accept additional handsets from other manufacturers that support this protocol. See *What to look for*, page 51, for more on this).

UNIDEN DECT 1825*

Price $79

Good points

- The best overall battery score. Once in the cradle it fully charged in only two hours and delivered nearly 20 hours of talk time, which means you'll rarely be caught out.
- Very good sound quality.
- Loud handset ringer.
- Easy to use.
- GAP compatible.

Bad points

- No backlit keypad.

* *Discontinued but may still be available in some shops.*

aren't DECT: the UNIDEN DSS 3415 and PANASONIC KX-TG2621, which use the 2.4 GHz spectrum, and the PANASONIC KX-TG5921 on 5.8 GHz.

The UNIDEN uses Digital Spread Spectrum (DSS) and the two PANASONICs Frequency Hopping Spread Spectrum (FHSS). These systems search through a range of frequencies to help reduce the chance of interference from other household appliances and also provide an added level of security against eavesdropping.

What about VoIP?

Voice over internet protocol (VoIP) allows users with a fast broadband internet connection to enjoy cheap or free phone calls both locally and overseas. However, until recently it needed a fair amount of computer knowledge, the handsets usually had to have a physical connection to a computer and you couldn't use them to make normal landline phone calls.

Now 'dual-mode' releases from companies such as PHILIPS, ORICOM, DORO and others are just starting to arrive, which allow you to use the landline like a normal cordless phone and switch back and forth to the VoIP setting when you can see that one of your online contacts is available to talk to via VoIP.

CHOICE will be conducting a test of these new phones as soon as more models become widely available. >

PANASONIC KX-TG1811

Price $59

Good points

- Very good overall range in both wood and brick homes.
- Fast recharge time.

Bad points

- Base only supports one handset.
- No backlit keypad.
- Not GAP compatible.

PHILIPS CD230

Price $70

Good points

- Very good sound quality.
- Easy to use.
- GAP compatible.

Bad points

- Relatively long battery recharge time and comparatively short standby time.

CONSUMER NZ

about the rest

- If **battery life** is important to you, the PHILIPS CD130 has both long talk and standby time, though it also takes comparatively long to recharge; it's fairly easy to use. The DORO DD760X also has a long talk time, but is comparatively expensive at $130.
- The DORO DD640 is best for **sound quality** and could be worth considering if you'll be using the phone in a particularly noisy environment.
- The PANASONIC KX-TG1701 and DORO DD610 scored comparatively well for **range**, though not as well as a couple of models in the *What to buy* list, and have good sound quality. They're also pretty cheap at $59 and $45 respectively. If you've got a particularly large garden or smallholding and want to use your phone outdoors, the PANASONIC KX-TG5921's outdoor range is up to 1 km with no obstructions between the base and handset, though it's only average inside.
- The models below these in the table (page 50) are just not quite as good for various reasons reflected in their scores — you can do better for the price.

SMS seems to be a feature cordless phone users are happy to do without. This might simply be a reflection of the lack of widespread SMS support across the landline networks, which means your cordless phone may not be able to use an SMS facility even if it has it.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE										FEATURES	
Brand / model (in rank order)	**Overall score (%)**	**Sound quality score (%)**	**Range score (%)**	**Ease of use score (%)**	**Battery score (%)**	**Talk time (hours)**	**Standby time (days)**	**Recharge time (hours)**	**Range (outside / inside, brick / inside, wood, m)**	**Ringer loudness (max dB)**	**Backlit keypad**	**Handsets supported**
Uniden DSS 3415	75	79	75	80	62	7.5	12.5	8.5	600 / 60 / 70	75	✓	4
Uniden DECT 1825 (A)	74	82	67	70	76	19.5	6.0	2.0	300 / 50 / 75	81		6
Panasonic KX-TG1811	73	70	80	69	69	14.5	7.5	3.0	400 / 60 / 90	74		1
Philips CD230	72	80	69	79	55	12.0	6.0	8.5	450 / 50 / 75	79	✓	4
Doro DD640	70	85	65	67	60	16.0	5.5	8.5	350 / 45 / 75	79	✓	5
Doro DD760X	70	75	63	73	69	18.0	6.0	5.5	350 / 45 / 70	81		6
Panasonic KX-TG5921	70	73	66	73	68	6.5	12.0	2.0	1000 / 45 / 55	80	✓	1
Philips CD130	70	68	65	77	73	16.5	14.0	13.5	250 / 50 / 70	76		5
Panasonic KX-TG1701 (B)	69	73	71	66	62	16.0	7.5	10.5	250 / 50 / 85	69		1
Doro DD610	67	78	73	56	54	12.0	6.0	9.5	700 / 50 / 75	75		4
Motorola ME4052-1	67	71	71	69	51	9.5	5.0	6.5	350 / 60 / 70	82		4
Oricom P70	66	65	69	67	63	18.0	6.0	10.0	350 / 55 / 70	70		4
Panasonic KX-TG2621 (A)	65	70	61	71	59	5.5	8.5	1.5	600 / 50 / 50	79	✓	1
Philips CD530	64	78	52	78	48	15.5	3.0	13.0	250 / 45 / 45	79	✓	5
Philips SE630	62	75	41	75	59	17.5	8.0	15.0	300 / 30 / 35	79	✓	5
Binatone iDECT X1	61	73	55	62	52	10.5	3.5	4.5	300 / 45 / 50	76		4
Oricom BB200	60	55	65	71	50	10.5	5.0	8.5	350 / 45 / 75	74		4

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Sound quality: 30%
- Range: 30%
- Ease of use: 20%
- Battery: 20%

Range This is how far in metres we could still make intelligible calls from:

- Outside: Base station and handset outside, with no obstructions between them.
- Inside 1: Base station inside, handset outside, through an internal and external brick wall.
- Inside 2: Base station inside, handset outside, through two wooden walls and a dense hedge.

REN (ringer equivalence number) This number shows how much of the phone line's capacity will be used by this phone — it's generally printed on the base. Phone lines generally support no more than a total of 3 REN connected at one time. If your connected equipment totals more than this some functions may not work — for example, the phone may not ring.

Digital system See *Digital differences*, page 48, for an explanation.

Batteries Indicates whether the phone can use normal AAA or AA batteries in an emergency if the rechargeable batteries run flat. All the phones in this test come with NiMH rechargeable batteries.

Price are recommended retail, as of May 2007.

HOW WE TESTED

- To test range the testers took the phones outside while they still had a direct line of sight to the base, to measure how far you could still have an intelligible conversation.
- Indoors they tested the phones' range with the impact of walls and other obstructions to a range of 100 m — the testers made calls through wood and brick walls.
- They assessed speech clarity, speech loudness, line noise and background noise reduction on each model, with a panel of three users making calls in a moderately noisy environment.
- To see how long the battery would last on one charge, testers set the phones to talk and then to standby and timed how long they ran. They also timed how long the phones took to recharge.
- For ease of use the testers considered factors such as how clear the instruction manual is, the feel and comfort of the handset, how easy it is to clean, if the LCD screen is easy to read and any other special features.

GAP	Two-way comm. between handsets	Ring tones	Polyphonic ringtones	Speed dial nos. memorised	Hearing aid compatibility claimed	Headset connection
	✓	20	✓	100	✓	✓
✓	✓	10	✓	100		
		20		59		
✓	✓	10	✓	50		
✓	✓	14	✓	100		✓
✓	✓	15	✓	100	✓	✓
		7		50		✓
✓	✓	10	✓	30		
		6		10		
	✓	6		10		
✓	✓	10		30		✓
	✓	5		10		
		7		50		✓
✓	✓	10	✓	50		
✓	✓	10	✓	250		
	✓	6		50		
	✓	9		10		

SPECIFICATIONS

REN	Digital system	Can use 2 or 3 AAA or AA batteries	Contact	Price ($)
< 0.1	DSS 2.4 GHz		www.uniden.com.au	99
< 0.1	DECT 1.8 GHz	✓	www.uniden.com.au	79
0.1	DECT 1.8 GHz	✓	www.panasonic.com.au	59
1	DECT 1.8 GHz	✓	www.philips.com.au	70
< 0.5	DECT 1.8 GHz	✓	www.doro.com.au	80
0.5	DECT 1.8 GHz	✓	www.doro.com.au	130
0.1	FHSS 5.8 GHz		www.panasonic.com.au	129
1	DECT 1.8 GHz	✓	www.philips.com.au	60
0.1	DECT 1.8 GHz	✓	www.dse.com.au	59
< 0.5	DECT 1.8 GHz	✓	www.doro.com.au	45
< 0.5	DECT 1.8 GHz	✓	www.oricom.com.au/motocordless	69
< 0.5	DECT 1.8 GHz	✓	www.oricom.com.au	59
0.1	FHSS 2.4 GHz		www.panasonic.com.au	89
1	DECT 1.8 GHz	✓	www.philips.com.au	100
1	DECT 1.8 GHz	✓	www.philips.com.au	130
1	DECT 1.9 GHz	✓	www.binatone.com.au	100
< 0.5	DECT 1.8 GHz	✓	www.oricom.com.au	69

(A) Discontinued but may still be available in some shops.
(B) Exclusive to Dick Smith Electronics stores.

what to look for

- Try the handset before you buy to make sure it's not too small or heavy and that it's comfortable to hold and fits well to your face.
- If you live in a large house with multiple levels a phone that supports multiple handsets is useful, so you can have one on each floor. You can also look for a model that has a dial pad and speaker on its base so you can also make calls from there.
However, more handsets won't give you wider coverage. The range is determined by the distance from the main base unit near the telephone socket, not from where the additional handsets are located.
- Some models allow you to communicate from handset to handset just like an intercom. Check the table for which models have this feature.
- If you tend to make long calls or need to take notes, a headset connection on the handset can be a handy feature.
- GAP: If a model supports GAP (Generic Access Protocol) you can use another handset that also supports GAP with your phone, from any other manufacturer. However, GAP compliancy extends only to the basic specification of the product, which means added features such as phonebooks may not work.
- Look for clearly labelled, large keys and a backlit keypad for good viewing in poor light.

PHILIPS/PANTENE/TNM

A phone with a long range is handy if you have a large garden.

Sitting safe and sound

Like all baby products, a high chair shouldn't just be functional and easy to use: it needs to be safe. It should be stable, sturdily built and have no gaps or crevices that might trap little arms or fingers (not to mention spilt food). Most of the 11 high chairs in this test, which cost between $60 and $379, pass these basic requirements.

But the high chair also shouldn't allow your child to climb or slip out of the seat. A five-point harness is the best way to secure them, and not all the tested chairs have one. We don't recommend any chair without a five-point harness.

The models in the *What to buy* list didn't pass every test we put them through — they might have a very small risk of trapped fingers or their labelling and instructions aren't quite up to scratch according to the standard's requirements. But they passed all major safety tests (see *How we tested*, page 54) as well as having a five-point harness, so they're the best choice from this group of high chairs.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **None of the high chairs passed all our tests, but four are a better choice than the rest, which failed at least one safety test or lack a five-point harness.**

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE		
Brand / model (in alphabetical order within groups)	Stability test	Scissoring / pinching test	Five-point harness
THE BEST Passed all major safety requirements; minor failures with fing			
Cam Campione	Pass	Pass	✓
Chicco Polly	Pass	Pass	✓
Jane Activa	Pass	Pass	✓
Peg Perego Prima Pappa Diner	Pass	Pass	✓
NOT RECOMMENDED Failed at least one major safety requirement and			
Bertini Jet R204 (A)	Pass	Fail (B)	✓
Boori Jaiden	Pass	Pass	
Childcare Compact Highchair 042400	Pass	Pass	
Ikea Gulliver	Pass	Pass	
Mother's Choice ABC Basic Highchair R202	Pass	Pass	✓ (B
Steelcraft Messina Hi Lo 31318	Pass	Fail (B)	✓
Swallow Avanti	Fail (B)	Pass	

what to buy

All these high chairs passed our major safety tests and each has a five-point harness.

CAM Campione
Price $260
Good points
- Folds into a compact size.
- Height-adjustable and reclinable seat.
- Crotch bar.

Bad points
- Minor risk of finger traps in small crevices under the tray arms.

CHICCO Polly
Price $300
Good points
- Folds into a compact size.
- Height-adjustable and reclinable seat.
- Crotch bar.

Bad points
- Minor risk of finger traps under the tray insert (if used).
- Can be unstable when folded.

A high chair should be stable, strong, secure, and have a five-point harness to hold your baby in.

FEATURES							SPECIFICATIONS				
	Crotch bar	Reclinable back / positions	Adjustable seat height / positions	Castors / brakes	Footrest	Easily removable padding	Recommended age / max weight	Maximum dimensions (D x W x H, mm)	Weight (inc. tray, kg)	Contact	Price ($)
and/or labels and instructions; five-point harness											
	✓	✓/ 3	✓/ 6	4 / 2	✓	✓	5–36 months / 15 kg	880 x 620 x 1055	9.5	www.babyco.com.au	260
	✓	✓/ 3	✓/ 7	4 / 4	✓	✓	6–36 months / 15 kg	960 x 780 x 1035	10.9	1300 306 628	300
		✓/ 3			✓	✓	ns	710 x 590 x 910	9.8	www.babyco.com.au	239
	✓	✓/ 4	✓/ 7	4 / 2	✓	✓	ns	845 x 590 x 960	10.2	www.housewares.com.au	379
esn't have a five-point harness											
	✓	✓/ 4	✓/ 8	4 / 4	✓	✓	From birth / 17 kg	670 x 590 x 1015	11.9	www.igc.com.au	219
					✓		ns	680 x 505 x 860	8.6	www.boori.com.au	299
					✓		From 6 months / ns	705 x 580 x 970	5.4	www.childcare-prod.com.au	80
	✓				✓		ns	540 x 540 x 910	4.3	www.ikea.com.au	99
					✓		6 months / 15 kg	700 x 590 x 995	5.8	www.igc.com.au	60
	✓	✓/ 3	✓/ 6	4 / 2	✓	✓	ns / 15 kg	765 x 600 x 1000	9.8	www.britax.com.au	199
	✓				✓		ns	700 x 575 x 965	5.8	www.babyco.com.au	70

USING THE TABLE

Performance See *How we tested*, page 54, for details of the tests.

Features These are discussed in *What to look for*, page 54, .

Price Recommended retail, as advised by manufacturers in April 2007, or the price we paid in February 2007.

ns Not stated.
(A) Discontinued but may still be available in some shops.
(B) See About the rest, *below, for details.*

JANE Activa
Price $239
Good points
- Can be turned into a table and chair for a toddler (see the photo, page 54).
- Reclinable seat.

Bad points
- Harness anchoring points are attached to the padding rather than the backrest, making the harness less secure than on some other models.
- Can't be folded up for storage.

PEG PEREGO Prima Pappa Diner
Price $379
Good points
- Height-adjustable and reclinable seat.
- Crotch bar.

Bad points
- Can be unstable when folded.

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

about the rest

- The BERTINI and STEELCRAFT failed the scissoring/pinching test: when you recline the seat, a gap opens between the tray support and the seat shell where your child's arm could get trapped.
- The BOORI has a four-point harness that's difficult to use and the crotch strap is anchored too far from the seat back, making it easier for a child to slip out.
- The CHILDCARE has potential finger traps under the armrests, and only a three-point harness.
- The IKEA has only a two-point harness (a waistband). The chair legs need to be levelled carefully during assembly to avoid wobbling. Its seat is comparatively narrow and it doesn't come with a tray, though you can buy one separately.
- The MOTHER'S CHOICE almost passed all tests, but the crotch strap on its five-point harness is anchored too far from the back of the seat, so a child could slip more easily through one side of this harness than on other models.
- The SWALLOW tipped over in the rearward stability test and it doesn't have a five-point harness. The manufacturer told us its high chairs comply with the European or UK standards, or the standard used in the US (we test to the international ISO standard), but in CHOICE's view the two drawbacks noted make it less safe than the models in the *What to buy* list.

A high chair shouldn't just be functional and easy to use: it needs to be safe, stable, sturdily built and have no gaps or crevices that might trap little arms or fingers (not to mention spilt food).

what to look for

- A **five-point harness** (with shoulders, waist and crotch straps) helps prevent a child from falling or climbing from the seat. Shoulder straps that attach to the seat at shoulder height provide more effective restraint than ones that attach to the back of the waist strap. The crotch strap should be anchored close enough to the back that the child can't slip through one side. The buckles should be easy for you, but not your child, to release.
- **Construction** and **framework** should be sturdy and robust enough to carry the weight of a child. Push on the seat and backrest to see if they squeak, sag, deform, move out of position or collapse.
- **Stability** is improved by legs that taper outwards farther than all other parts of the chair.
- **Moving parts** shouldn't be able to pinch, crush or trap a child's finger, toe, limb or head. Two tested models, the BERTINI and STEELCRAFT, failed this test, while three others (the CAM, CHICCO and CHILDCARE) have a very small risk of trapping a finger — we didn't consider it bad enough to fail them. Also check for sharp edges and points along the edges of the chair and tray, and easily detachable parts (including stickers) that could pose a choking hazard.
- The international standard doesn't allow **castors**, but they're a common and useful feature and are safe enough as long as they have brakes and you use them. Models with four castors should have brakes on at least two of them (the front or back set).

Comfort and ease of use

- Choose a larger **seat** if you plan to use the chair for some years.
- A **reclining** back is useful for younger babies who can't sit upright for long.
- If there's a **tray** it should be secure when fitted but easy to remove, attach and adjust.
- Test any **height-adjustment** and **back-reclining mechanisms**. They should be easy for you, but not your child, to operate. The mechanism should be out of the child's reach and require some strength or dexterity to use. Check the table for models with adjustable seat height and a range of reclining positions.
- **A foldable** chair should be easy to fold and preferably lock in its folded position.
- If you're going to be regularly getting the chair out and then storing it away again, make sure it's not too **heavy**.
- A **footrest** or leg support is important to support the child's feet or calves. All models on test have a footrest.

The Jane Activa converts into a table and chair for a toddler, allowing you to get use out of the high chair for longer.

HOW WE TESTED

- Our tester checked the high chairs' stability (backward, forward and sideways) and looked for sturdy construction as well as for scissoring, pinching and finger traps as per the international standard, ISO 9221-1 and 9221-2 1992 (E). There's still no Australian standard for high chairs, though one is currently being drafted. It's expected the new Australian standard will require high chairs to have a five-point harness, so for this test we've only recommended high chairs that have one.
- Other standards used by high chair manufacturers include the European standard ENV 1178 and the British BS 5799 (both similar to the international standard), and the standard commonly used in the US, ASTM F404.

Home ownership a distant dream

A Galaxy research survey commissioned by the Financial Planning Association found 35% of the participants had been unable to afford the home they want. The problem was worst for the 25–34 age group, with 51% experiencing problems with housing affordability.

Australians have experienced a steep rise in house prices compared to incomes — in the 1980s Australian house prices were only about three times or less the median annual income (except Sydney, at four to five times). A recent Demographia survey that looked at six nations found that six out of eight Australian cities are severely unaffordable, with median house prices being six times more than the median annual income.

The worst rating goes to Sydney, ranked seventh on the unaffordable list across major cities in the six nations, followed by Hobart (15), Adelaide (18), Melbourne (19), Perth (23) and Brisbane (26). Darwin and Canberra are faring slightly better but are still rated seriously unaffordable, with median house prices more than four times the median annual income.

The survey concluded that Australia has the most pervasive housing affordability crisis, worse than Ireland, New Zealand, the UK, US and Canada.

As a small step towards better affordability, state governments give stamp duty concessions to first home buyers — see Table 1. For example, in its 2006–07 budget the WA government doubled the first home buyer exemption threshold from $250,000 to $500,000, and the median house price of $443,000 in Perth is now fully stamp duty exempt for first home buyers.

According to the WA government, the increase in the exemption means 88% of WA's first home buyers won't pay any stamp duty.

But do these measures go far enough to solve the problem? We'd be very interested in your experiences, especially if you're a first home buyer. Have you found a way to make buying a house more affordable — for example, did your parents help with money, or are you buying as a group rather than a single or couple? Please contact us at housing@choice.com.au.

Table 1. Stamp duty ($)

State	Stamp duty paid by an owner occupier on a purchase price of:			Stamp duty paid by a first home buyer on a purchase price of:			Max. concesssion up to purchase price of:	Phased out at:
	200,000	400,000	600,000	200,000	400,000	600,000		
ACT	5500	15,000	26,250	20	15,000	26,250	290,000	331,000
NSW	5490	13,490	22,490	0	0	22,490	500,000	600,000
NT	4300	16,300	29,900	0	3487.50	17,087.50	350,000	No max.
Queensland	2000	6000	13,500	0	4400	13,500	329,999	500,000
SA	6830	16,330	26,830	5615	16,330	26,830	80,000	250,001
Tasmania	5675	13,550	21,550	1675	13,550	21,550	152,100	350,001
Victoria	6810	16,810	31,660	3810 (A)	13,810 (A)	31,660	150,000–500,000	500,000
WA	6200	15,700	26,100	0	0	26,100	500,000	600,000

As at 30 June 2007, for established houses. Different concession rates are available for new houses in some states.
(A) Victoria also has a First Home Bonus of $3000 for houses valued up to $500,000, and this has been factored into the amount. Different concessions are available for families and pensioners.

Table 2. Median house prices in capital cities ($)

Sydney	480,000
Perth	443,000
Canberra	411,200
Darwin	360,000
Melbourne	345,000
Brisbane	331,000
Adelaide	285,000
Hobart	270,000

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, September 2006.

SUPER BONUS FOR YOUR NESTEGG

As a one-off measure announced with the budget, the Federal Government doubled its super co-contributions on amounts you paid into your super (above your employer's contribution) in the financial year 2005/06. While it's too late to change what you did then, it's worth knowing about how the co-contribution works.

The super co-contribution is targeted at low to middle income earners, to provide an incentive to put money aside for retirement. Up to $1.50 is paid on top of every $1 you contribute to super from your after-tax income. For example, if you contribute $200, up to an extra $300 is paid.

In the 2007/2008 financial year the maximum co-contribution of $1500 per year is available if your income is $28,980 or less and you contribute $1000 in that year. The co-contribution is reduced by five cents for every dollar of income above $28,980 up to $58,980. For example, if you earn $40,000 and contribute $1000 you'll receive a co-contribution of $949; if you earn $50,000 you'll receive $449.

Since you're contributing from your after-tax income the amount won't be taxed when you pay it into super (although a 15% tax applies on your earnings). However, you won't be able to access the money until retirement.

Some conditions apply: for example, you need to be under 71. For more information contact the ATO on 13 10 20 or go to www.ato.gov.au.

Health claims standard one step closer

Australia is now one step closer to having better regulation of claims about the nutrition or health benefits of foods that can be made on food labels and in advertising. It's taken more than a decade to develop, but the latest proposal from Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) is a great improvement on previous efforts, which would have allowed KELLOGG'S Coco Pops to claim they were a good source of calcium for strong and healthy bones, but not full-cream milk.

To avoid these sorts of absurdities, FSANZ has developed robust eligibility criteria, which take into consideration how much saturated fat, sodium, sugars and energy (kilojoules) are in a food as well as the amount of fibre, fruit and vegetables, nuts, legumes and protein.

The new eligibility criteria are a step in the right direction but some things still haven't been adequately addressed and could result in consumers being misled about the health benefits of some foods.

Some examples are:

- For products containing added herbs, such as ginkgo biloba or ginseng, it will be left to individual food manufacturers to determine how much a person needs to consume to obtain a health benefit. They can then add as little as 10% of this 'effective' amount.
- Manufacturers can label the glycaemic index (GI) of a food but aren't required to indicate whether it's low, medium or high.
- There is still no commitment to an active surveillance and monitoring program to ensure manufacturers don't make false or misleading claims.

One of CHOICE's biggest concerns is that the eligibility criteria won't be applied to nutrient content claims — claims such as '% fat-free', 'no added sugar', 'low salt', and 'contains calcium'. So a highly salty food can still claim to be '99% fat-free' and a low-fibre, sugary breakfast cereal can claim to be a good source of vitamins and minerals. This could continue to let through advertising hype that only tells consumers part of the story.

CHOICE made a submission to FSANZ outlining these concerns and others, and hopes that the proposed standard for nutrition, health and related claims will be strengthened before it eventually comes into force. More information at choice.com.au/healthclaims. ■

CAMPAIGN NEWS

PHARMACEUTICAL BENEFITS SCHEME REFORMS AND THEIR IMPACT ON CONSUMERS

Government research predicts that health will take the largest bite out of the Commonwealth budget, and the biggest cost in health is the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS). In 2006 the government announced changes to curb spending on the PBS to stop it 'blowing out'. These will be introduced over the next five years, starting in July this year.

The changes have focused on savings to government, with no attention given to the costs paid by consumers. The standard PBS co-payment (the amount consumers pay) has gone up by more than $10 per prescription since 1997. Research shows that increasing numbers of Australian consumers are not having their prescriptions filled due to cost.

Consumers have been left out of the PBS dialogue. The government has set up two committees to consider PBS reforms — the Stakeholder Reference Group and the Access to Medicines Working Group. Both are industry-dominated and the latter doesn't have any consumer representation at all.

CHOICE has written to the Secretary of the Department of Health and Ageing to find out why consumers have been left out. We'll also be approaching both major parties, urging them to reduce the PBS co-payment. We're going to keep a close eye on what's happening in PBS reform this year. More information at choice.com.au/pbsreform.

TOO MANY EXEMPTIONS TO 'DO NOT CALL' REGISTER

The government's new Do Not Call Register is extremely popular — consumers have registered over a million phone numbers, and the minister had to issue a warning about door-knock scams asking for money to put you on the register. If you haven't already, you can still sign up at www.donotcall.gov.au — it's free.

But the register won't protect you from all unsolicited calls — political parties, charities and some other organisations are exempt from the ban. Survey and market research calls are also allowed. The new Telecommunications (Do Not Call Register) (Telemarketing and Research Calls) Industry Standard 2007 now specifies the times when these calls can be made, but it doesn't give you a way to stop them altogether.

Unsolicited calls from political parties, charities, religious groups and the like are still nuisance calls for those who don't want to receive them. Join our call to action by emailing the Minister for Communications Helen Coonan and Federal Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd to ask them to scrap these exemptions.

Take action at choice.com.au/donotcall.

RECALLS & bans

Nowadays there are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them in CHOICE. For comprehensive recall information go to the Product Recalls Australia website: www.recalls.gov.au. If you don't have web access, call the Product Safety Policy section of the ACCC on (02) 6243 1262.

Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

FOOD Italian Foods has recalled **Prosciutto Parma Whole Legs** and **Serrano ham,** vacuum-packed slices and whole legs. Lot code for Prosciutto Parma is 11-07/5A, and for Serrano it's 07050001.

The problem Testing indicates the presence of *Listeria monocytogenes*, which may cause illness or miscarriage in pregnant women, or illness in young children, the elderly or people with a low immune system.

What to do Don't eat it. If you have any concerns, contact your GP. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or call 02 9807 3082 for more information.

FOOD Franklins has recalled **No Frills Frozen Pizzas**, 500 g, Ham & Pineapple and Supreme varieties, all best-before dates up to and including 31 DEC 07, with barcodes of 9310172091401 and 9310120914 25, and sold in NSW.

The problem Some pizzas have been found to be mouldy.

What to do Don't eat it. Return it to your nearest Franklins store for a refund, or call 1800 004 844 for more information.

FOOD Ikea has recalled the following **Ikea Marinated Herring** varieties with best-before dates up to and including 13-02-2008: **Inglad Sill** (marinated with onions and carrots), **Senapssill** (marinated with mustard), and **Dillsill** (marinated with dill), sold in Ikea stores in NSW, Queensland and Victoria.

The problem A large piece of glass has been found in a jar.

What to do Don't eat it. Return it to your nearest Ikea store for a refund.

BABY PACIFIER (DUMMY) Billy-Bob Teeth has recalled **Billy Bob Pacifier**, sold between 19 October 2006 and 20 December 2006.

The problem It doesn't meet new mandatory safety standards and could pose a hazard.

What to do Don't use it. Keep it out of reach of children. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

PLAYPEN Jolly Kidz has recalled **Jolly Versatile Playpen**, code HPP005, sold in baby goods stores and toy stores for the last four years.

The problem The round black rubber feet on the bottom of the playpen can detach, posing a choking hazard.

What to do Stop using the playpen. Either remove and dispose of the black rubber feet, or for more information and options call 02 9980 6633.

PLAY EQUIPMENT Hills Industries has recalled **Hills Play Gyms and Slides**, sold between 1 December 2005 and 10 May 2007. They have distinctive dark-blue steel frames and bright green plastic components, which are embossed with the Hills logo, and 'Replace by' date markings between OCT 2009 and DEC 2010.

The problem The plastic components don't have adequate UV stabilisation and are suffering premature fading and minor surface cracking, reducing their lifespan.

What to do Stop using them. Call 1300 734 323, or go to www.hills.com.au to organise a free replacement set of plastic components.

HEADBAND Paramount Pictures has recalled **Shrek Ears Headband**, consisting of a plastic headband covered in bright green fabric, with two ears in the same fabric supported internally by wire.

The problem The wire may become exposed.

What to do If you've received them (they were given away free), please dispose of them. Call 02 9265 0287 or email shrekears_au@paramount.com for more information.

HEADBAND Acorn Australia has recalled a **Head Band Set**, four-piece, item number HO 355200, sold between December 2006 and 31 March 2007, in NSW, Queensland, SA and WA.

The problem It contains small parts that pose a choking hazard to young children.

What to do Remove it from the reach of young children. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 1800 021 157 or 02 9858 2022.

TOY Sunny R & J Group has recalled **Turtle on Wheels toy**, item number KC-001, and **Mobile Machinery Shop toy**, item number 728, sold between March 2006 and November 2006.

The problem They contain small parts that pose a choking hazard to young children.

What to do Remove them from the reach of young children. Return them to Sunny R & J Group, B7, 27–29 Fariola Street, Silverwater 2264, for a refund, or call 02 9737 0663 for more information.

TOY Socrates Enterprises has recalled the **Giggling toy**, a wooden head with a rattle attached, which came in a white box with a picture of the product on the front, and the words 'Giggling,' Made in Taiwan,' the trademark 'Child Friend' and the barcode 4716841202171. It sold for approximately $19.95 between January 2006 and March 2007, in shops trading under the name Socrates for Curious Minds.

The problem It doesn't meet mandatory safety standards. The toy dummy and ring attached by a string pose a choking hazard to young children.

What to do Remove it from the reach of children. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or post it to Socrates Enterprises, Distribution Centre, 14 Suakin Street, Pymble 2073.

TOY Active Imports has recalled **Kal Zhi Beach Fun Truck and Trailer**, barcode number 9320328161896.

The problem It contains small parts that pose a choking hazard to young children.

What to do Remove it from the reach of young children. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 08 9248 9633.

GARDEN VAC GMC has recalled the **GMC WV1 1100 W Garden Vac**. It doesn't have an electrical approval number on the rating label at the rear of the motor cover. Appliances with the number SGS/070066 on the rating label aren't affected by the recall.

The problem The outlet tube isn't the correct length or shape to prevent contact with the fan.

What to do Don't use it. Call 1300 855 462 between 7 am and 6 pm EST, Monday to Friday, to arrange for a replacement tube to be sent to you.

LIGHT Bunnings has recalled **Eiger Electrical Twin Spotlight**, model CWLFL64W, approval number #S/10, batch codes TW001/0641 and TW001/0642, sold at Bunnings Warehouse stores from early December 2006 to 26 February 2007.

The problem If power isn't turned off at the socket outlet when replacing the bulb, and the reflector is removed, the user may be exposed to live parts and risk electric shock.

What to do Don't attempt to remove or change the bulbs or otherwise dismantle the light while it's still plugged into the socket outlet and turned on. Return the product to any Bunnings store for a refund, or call 03 9017 3914 for more information.

VITAMIN SUPPLEMENTS AWS Medical has recalled **Select Multivitamin and Mineral Supplement** (AUST L 131497) and **Select Women's Multi Vitamins** (AUST L 131498). The vitamins were sold in Woolworths.

The problem The containers aren't fitted with child-resistant closures, which are required due to the iron content of the vitamins.

What to do Keep them out of the reach of children. Return them to your nearest Woolworths store for a refund.

HEALTH SUPPLEMENT Performex Health has recalled **Enhancex-Him** (AUST L 133601) and **Enhancex-Her** (AUST L 133602), all pack sizes, sold via the internet.

The problem They contain an analogue of sildenafil, a prescription-only medicine that could give rise to serious health consequences, especially for people with existing medical conditions such as heart problems or people at risk of a stroke.

What to do Don't use it. Contact the company at www.performexhealth.com.

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